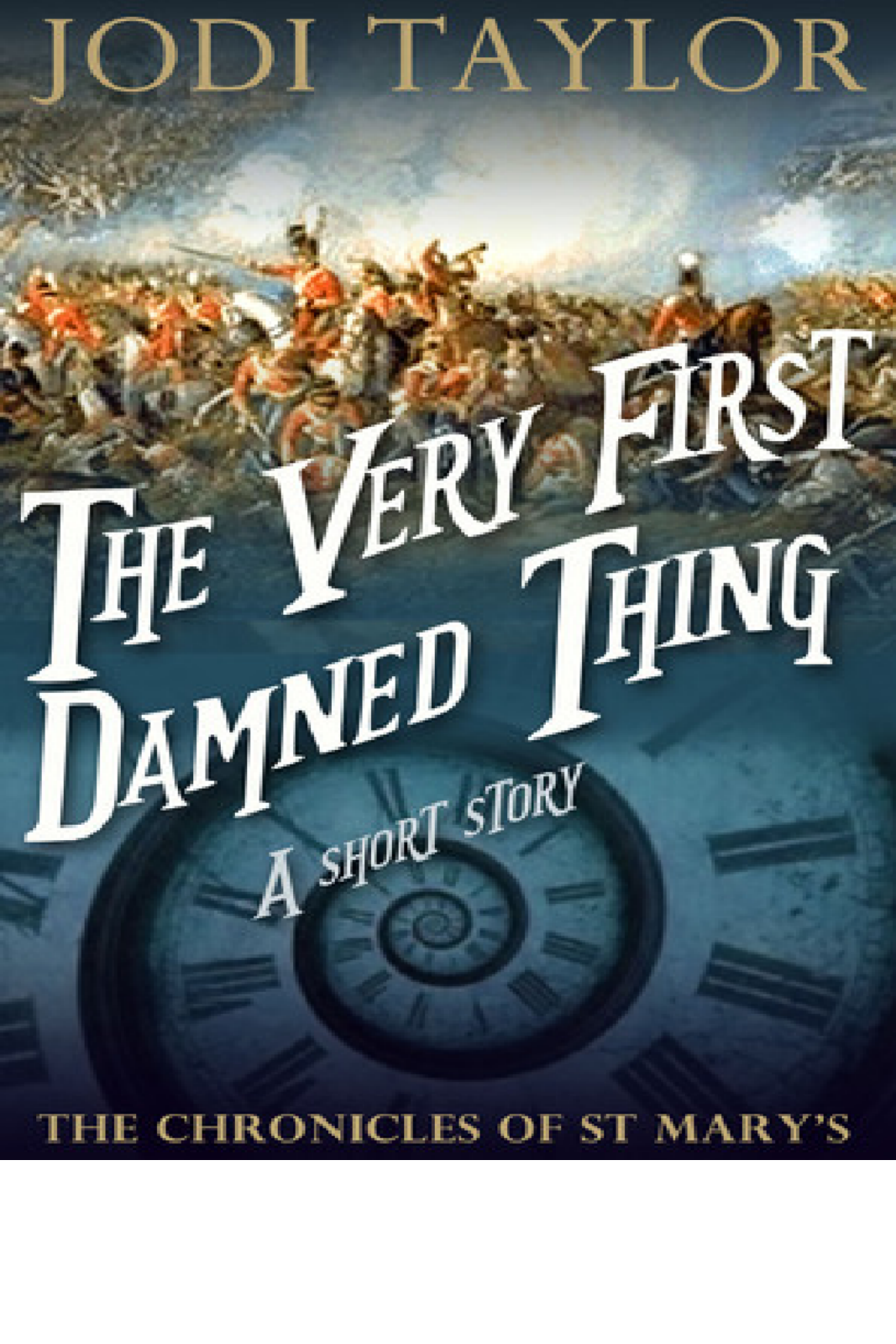




JODI TAYLOR

THE VERY FIRST
DAMNED THING

A SHORT STORY

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S

THE VERY FIRST DAMNED THING

A short story from The Chronicles of St Mary's Series

Jodi Taylor

Ever wondered how it all began?

It's two years since the final victory at the Battersea Barricades. The fighting might be finished, but for Dr Bairstow, just now setting up St Mary's, the struggle is only beginning.

How will he assemble his team?

From where will his funding come?

How can he overcome the massed ranks of the Society for the Protection of Historical Buildings?

How do stolen furniture, a practical demonstration at the Stirrup Charge at Waterloo, students' alcohol-ridden urine, a widowed urban guerrilla, a young man wearing exciting knitwear, and four naked security guards all combine to become the St Mary's of the future?

Acknowledgements

Thanks, as always, to all the good people at Accent Press, especially my editor Cat Camacho, who has never once mentioned my failure to spell cannon correctly anywhere in my manuscript.

More thanks to my technical advisor, Phillip Dawson.

And many thanks to Tom Williams, author of *Burke at Waterloo*, who took time out from his own busy schedule to keep me straight about the battle. Any errors are all due to my own pig-headedness.

List of Characters

Dr Bairstow	A Director in search of an historical research organisation to direct.
Mr Strong	A man with more memories than money.
Major Ian Guthrie	An army officer in search of excitement.
Mr Black and Mr Brown	Two discreet government officials with varying levels of enthusiasm for 'investigating major historical events in contemporary time'.
Mrs Green	A lady who wants to go to the ball. Ancestor of someone special to Dr Bairstow.
Dr Maxwell	Ginger-haired historian keeping her team together.
Mr Tom	Bashford Another historian. Concussed? Who can tell?
Mr Markham	Everyone's favourite.
Big Dave Murdoch	A really big security guard.
Mr Weller	Another security guard. Normal sized.
Mr Ritter	Another one.
Mr Randall	And another one.
Mr Evans	And yet another.
Mrs Theresa Mack	Former urban guerrilla about to get a new lease on life.
Professor Andrew Rapson	In desperate need of urine and calling for contributions.
Dr Octavius Dowson	A man pleading to be rehoused.
Dr Evelyn Chalfont	Chancellor of the University of Thirsk. Former leader of the resistance and still fighting.
Dr Helen Foster	Still not playing well with others.
Mrs Enderby	Head of Wardrobe.
Chief Leon Farrell	Late on the scene.
Mr Baverstock	Historian
Miss Lower	Historian
The Man from SPOHB	Wears cardigans knitted by his mother. No more need be said.
Miss Spindle	A young woman for whom the sight of four naked security guards

Mrs Partridge

was more than a revelation.
She'll turn up when she feels like
it.

St Mary's Priory

Abandoned, dilapidated, forgotten.
But not for much longer.

Various armies of various nationalities, urine-clutching students, and
thoroughly bribed construction workers.

Contents

Chapter	
Other Titles	

One of the most important events in the history of mankind – after the discovery of fire, the development of the wheel, and the invention of chocolate, of course – occurred in London on an overcast chilly rainy afternoon, and it is entirely typical that it should have been witnessed only by two bedraggled pigeons and a scrawny cat.

The cat, slinking his way across that almost unheard of London phenomenon, a half-empty car park, paused and considered the sudden appearance of a small stone shack in the back right-hand corner. Since cats possess intelligence far superior to that of the human race, he found nothing untoward in this occurrence, picked up the pace, and vanished out of the car park and out of this story.

The pigeons, it can be assumed, considered their options and then continued with their own plans for the afternoon.

For long minutes, nothing happened and then, almost on the stroke of three forty-five, a tall gentleman, clad in a long dark overcoat and well muffled against the cold, stepped out of the hut. For a moment, he stared about him, his expression bearing a more than passing resemblance to a middle-aged vulture waiting impatiently for the soul of an imminent corpse to get a move on and start heading towards the light. His disapproval deepened further as the rain increased and he opened his umbrella with something of a snap.

Nearly two years after the final victory at the Battersea Barricades, London was still a drab and dreary place. Damaged buildings glistened wetly in the drizzle. There was no colour. Many shop windows were empty. Cannibalised vehicles lined the pavements. Everything was broken down or worn out or just plain old and that included the people. In the aftermath of any major conflict, the younger generation are usually conspicuous by their absence.

The gentleman, leaning rather heavily on his walking stick, gingerly picked his way across the remains of the scaffolded Chelsea Bridge, contemplated for a moment the miraculously unscathed outline of Battersea Power Station, and descended a flight of steps to the cluster of inconspicuous buildings huddled between that and the bridge itself. Passing a newsagents, he paused to contemplate the headline, 'Where did all the money go?' compressed his lips, and approached an anonymous, shabby grey building amply decorated with pigeon product. The modest sign over the door read 'Britannic Enterprises'. Just as he opened the front door, a nearby clock began to strike four. The gentleman allowed himself the satisfied nod of the habitually punctual.

In his tiny office to the left of the door, a grizzled, grey-haired man looked up, an expression of welcome on his face.

'Dr Bairstow, sir. Nice to see you back again.'

‘Glad to be back, Mr Strong. I believe I have another appointment with the panel in Room 29 at four this afternoon.’

‘You do indeed, sir. If you care to place your feet in the marked area ... That’s it, sir ... And look up, please ...’

The biometric needs of the security system having been taken care of, Dr Bairstow consented to be wanded, while agreeing that yes indeed, it was very chilly out, but that was only to be expected at this time of year.

‘There we are, sir, all done. I’ll get the major to take you up.’ He pressed a hidden buzzer and another door further down the shabby corridor instantly opened and a tall man with dark blond hair stepped out. Since Mr Strong had already vanished back into his cubbyhole and no actual conversation had been exchanged, Dr Bairstow concluded that the major had been watching proceedings via the discreetly concealed but always present CCTV cameras. Very shabby the building might be, but the security was top of the range.

‘Dr Bairstow?’

‘Major Guthrie, isn’t it?’

‘That’s right, sir. This way please.’

‘This way’ proved to be along a dusty corridor to an old-fashioned open cage lift at the end. Clashing the doors open, the major ushered his guest inside and pulled the doors to behind them. Ignoring the old-fashioned push buttons in front of him, none of which would have taken him to his destination, he said quietly, ‘Second floor. Room 29. Authority Guthrie, bravo echo two.’

The lift purred surprisingly smoothly upwards.

Emerging, the two men turned left. Room 29 was at the end.

Major Guthrie tapped at the door and opened it, announcing, ‘Dr Bairstow.’

The three people sitting behind an empty desk rose politely to their feet. In keeping with the office, which had surely not been decorated since the relief of Mafeking, they too wore grey. Grey suits, white shirts. The men wore plain grey ties – the woman a scarlet scarf twisted around her neck. Other than a set of military prints depicting scenes from Waterloo, this was the only splash of colour in the room.

Greetings were exchanged, the major left the room, and everyone sat down. There was a long pause. Dr Bairstow waited impassively.

The man sitting on the left, who had been introduced on previous occasions as Mr Black, began. ‘Well, Dr Bairstow, our experts have finally finished reading your proposals. Based on what you have given us so far, they say that what you propose could be done. The full details of how it could be done, of course, are the parts you have chosen to withhold.’

He waited politely, but so did his guest. Eventually, when it was

clear Dr Bairstow was not going to speak, he continued. 'However, since you have made it perfectly clear that nothing in History can be altered or removed, I have to ask you again: what is the point of--' he coughed and said with some embarrassment, '-time travel?'

Dr Bairstow frowned. 'You might find it easier to think in terms of an organisation that investigates major historical events in contemporary time, rather than actually undertaking--' his face wrinkled in distaste, '-what you refer to as time travel.'

'Does it actually matter what we call it?'

'We have been over this several times already,' interrupted his colleague – the one sitting on the right, and known as Mr Brown, 'I think that what Dr Bairstow is saying – without actually being so presumptuous as to put words into your mouth of course, sir,' he added, 'is that if nothing else, the value arises from possession. If we have it then no one else does. I'm sure I am right in thinking that should we say no to this extraordinary proposal, there are many out there who would say yes.'

Silence settled heavily. Whether it was the effect of the heavy curtains or thick carpet, sound died very easily in this room.

Dr Bairstow smiled thinly. 'You won't say no.'

Mr Black seemed to bridle. 'You seem very sure of that. I have to tell you, that given the current state of the economy, those whom we have consulted are far from convinced of the prudence of committing large – no, I beg your pardon – *colossal* sums of money to this endeavour.'

'I'm sorry. I should perhaps have said, "You *don't* say no."'

'You don't know that.'

'My dear sir, I invite you to contemplate the nature of the ... enterprise ... I have placed before you. I *know* you don't say no.'

There was a pause.

'Ah.'

'Precisely.'

Mr Black tried again. 'But the cost ...'

'Astronomical, I should think,' said Mr Brown, cheerfully.

Dr Bairstow appeared to choose his words very carefully.

'There is about to be a new renaissance. New ideas are sweeping aside the old. Political thinking in this country has changed forever. There is, at present, a power vacuum waiting to be filled. New leaders are emerging at every level. I believe a new young Chancellor has been appointed at the University of Thirsk. I intend to involve her fully in this project.'

Mr Black looked up sharply. 'Do I understand that you support Dr Chalfont's politics?'

Dr Bairstow smiled slightly.

‘I do not support anyone’s politics. I generally find that governments are more than capable of making their own mess without any help from me. What I want to say is that for the protection of everyone, my organisation will be politically neutral. It will be written into our contracts. We will surrender our right to vote or partake in political activity of any kind. We will voluntarily disenfranchise ourselves. In return, no government will seek to influence us or our findings. We will not submit to such actions.’

‘What sort of people will you employ? How will you recruit them?’

‘I shall look for people who took part in the recent uprisings. Who fought for and value the peace and freedom we enjoy today. They will, I’m afraid, be people who will not appreciate the virtues of committees or debate. They will be people who get things done. They will be accustomed to overcoming difficulties and obstacles. They will be brash. They will be loud. They will be very disrespectful of authority in all forms. However, they will be dedicated. They will get the job done.’ He smiled at Mr Black. ‘You will get your money’s worth.’

‘But of what *use* will it be?’

Dr Bairstow frowned. ‘The truth is always important. It may not be popular, or fashionable, or convenient but it is always important. Somewhere there must always be a record of events as they actually occurred. Not the politically airbrushed record, or religious wishful thinking or the socially acceptable version, but the often inconvenient truth.’

‘My dear sir, you are describing a powder keg. What on earth would we do with this inconvenient truth?’

Dr Bairstow shrugged. ‘That is entirely up to you, sir. For example, one day, the events of the last years will be considered History. How important is it for people to know what happened? Or why it happened? And why it should never happen again?’

Mrs Green, the third part of the colourful trio, who had so far remained silent, turned her head. She had light, honey-coloured hair and the eyes of one who has seen too much happen, too quickly. ‘*Will* it ever happen again?’

Her voice was quiet.

Dr Bairstow regarded her for some time before replying.

‘Madam, I cannot say.’

‘I think you could say very easily. So tell me, please – will it all happen again? Should we be taking measures to prevent such events ever reoccurring?’

‘Madam, I cannot say because I am not allowed to say. If it helps, however, I can say that *if* you take sufficient steps to ensure that similar events never happen again within your lifetime, then similar

events *will* never again happen in your lifetime.’

‘But the cost,’ persisted Mr Black. ‘Where’s the return?’

Dr Bairstow regarded them silently for a few seconds and then rose to his feet. ‘I have made all my arguments. Perhaps, now, a small demonstration might be in order.’

No one rose with him.

Mr Brown said warily, ‘What sort of a demonstration?’

Dr Bairstow gestured at the prints around the walls. ‘You have an interest in the events of June 1815? Or are these rather fine prints just office furniture?’

Mr Black bridled slightly. ‘An ancestor of mine fought at Waterloo and these are from my own personal collection.’

‘Then, madam, gentlemen, I invite you, please, to come with me.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘I think “when?” might be a more appropriate question.’

Mr Brown, half-risen from his seat, stopped in mid-movement. ‘Are we ...? Are we actually ...?’

Dr Bairstow nodded. ‘I can think of no quicker or easier way to ensure your enthusiastic support – and funding, obviously – than a small demonstration. I have, therefore, programmed in what I consider to be a most appropriate destination.’

‘But ...’

‘Yes?’

Mr Black moistened his suddenly dry lips. ‘Where to? I mean, when to?’

He paused and mentally reviewed the sentence.

Dr Bairstow smiled faintly. ‘Yes, the rules of grammar do need to be bent occasionally. The phrase “a long time ago in the future” can take some getting used to. Along with that old favourite, “he will die a hundred years ago”. I thought you might enjoy a short but educational visit to Waterloo, 18th June 1815. The Stirrup Charge. When the Scots Greys broke Napoleon’s square. Thirty minutes. No longer.’

They gaped at him. ‘But you can’t expect us to just – get up and go.’

‘Why ever not?’

‘There are committees before which your proposal must be put. Working groups to be set up. Risks assessed. Benefits calculated. Safeguards installed. Security implemented.’

‘Dear me,’ commented Dr Bairstow. ‘No wonder it takes so very long to get anything done here. Do you think they had time to set up committees on the Barricades?’

Silence followed as this remark was contemplated with incomprehension.

Dr Bairstow relented. ‘If it makes you feel more comfortable, we can certainly include that rather formidable-looking young major who

escorted me here. He seems very capable and I'm sure is more than equal to any threat I might – inadvertently, of course – represent. Shall we go?’

The weather had not improved. Such streetlights as were working had come on early and sleet could clearly be seen amongst the drizzle. No one else was on the streets.

Dr Bairstow, stick tapping on the paving stones, led them across the car park to the shack still parked in the far right-hand corner. Both the cat and the pigeons had disappeared.

The small party halted outside the scruffy shack appropriately parked in the disabled space. There was an air of unspoken disappointment.

‘You were, perhaps, expecting something a little more ... science fiction based?’

‘Well,’ said Mr Brown. ‘Yes.’ He smiled, mischievously. ‘Perhaps it’s bigger on the inside?’

‘Alas ...’

Major Guthrie pushed his way forwards. ‘If you don’t mind, sir, I’ll go first.’

‘By all means,’ said Dr Bairstow. ‘Door.’

Producing a gun, Major Guthrie covered the doorway, angling the gun up, down, around, leaving no area unchecked.

Dr Bairstow stood quietly, leaning on his stick, apparently unconcerned. ‘You might want to check the toilet. Yes, that door there. Don’t bother with the lockers – there really is no room even for life’s essentials, let alone a concealed miscreant.’

‘I’m sure you’re right, sir,’ said Guthrie politely, and proceeded to subject the toilet, every locker, and even the area under the console to ruthless scrutiny. Finally, and with some reluctance, he holstered his gun and stood aside.

‘If you would be so good,’ murmured Dr Bairstow, ushering his passengers in through the door.

Somewhat reluctantly, one step at a time, his guests entered, gazing about them. Their faces gave nothing away, but then they had been government officials for a very long time. They were almost certainly the descendents of a long line of government officials. Cartwheeling with excitement had probably been bred out of them round about the 14th century.

To the right of the door, a console with an incomprehensible array of read-outs, flashing lights, dials, and switches sat beneath a large, wall-mounted screen, currently showing only a view of an empty car park in the gathering dusk.

Bunches of cables ran up the walls to disappear into a tiled ceiling.

Two excruciatingly uncomfortable-looking chairs were screwed to the floor in front of the console. A row of lockers ran along the back wall, and in the far corner, a narrow door led into the toilet.

The tiny space smelled of stale people, chemicals, hot electrics, damp carpet, and cabbage.

‘I have room for one passenger to sit alongside me in relative comfort,’ said Dr Bairstow. ‘Perhaps, madam, you would like to take advantage of our meagre facilities. I’m sure I don’t have to impress upon you the importance of not touching anything.’

Somewhat gingerly, Mrs Green seated herself and looked around.

‘It’s a little bit ...’

‘Cramped?’

‘Yes, but that wasn’t what I meant.’

‘Ah. You mean the smell.’

She smiled slightly. ‘Well, I didn’t want to be rude ...’

‘Yes, my profound apologies, but it is a complete mystery to us. We have no idea whence the cabbage smell emanates. We have, in the past, constructed new pods and the next day we are overwhelmed by the aroma of cabbage. One of the great unsolved mysteries of the universe, I’m afraid. You will soon grow accustomed.’

As he was speaking, his hands were moving over the console. Lights flashed. ‘Computer.’

The computer chirped acknowledgement.

His passengers, as one man, looked apprehensively towards the door.

Dr Bairstow said, in what he liked to think of as reassuring tones, ‘Please do not be alarmed. In the unlikely event of anything going wrong, we will certainly never know anything about it.’

Mrs Green gripped the console with both hands.

‘There really is no need to hold so tightly. I am rather good at this. Computer, initiate jump.’

The world went white.

Inside the pod, complete silence reigned.

‘You can open your eyes, now,’ said Dr Bairstow in some amusement.

Four considerably shaken people opened their eyes.

Major Guthrie said hoarsely, ‘Did something happen? We didn’t move.’

‘I told you I was rather good at this. Allow me to activate the screen.’

Four people stared speechlessly at the screen.

Thousands of tiny figures moved purposefully around a vast landscape. In silence. Cannons fired puffs of silent white smoke.

Charging horses thundered silently across the screen. Chaos reigned quietly.

‘Dear ... God,’ said Mr Brown, unable to tear his eyes away.

Mr Black, however, was made of sterner stuff. ‘I don’t believe it. I don’t believe we’ve moved at all. This is just some holo projection and ...’

Dr Bairstow said, ‘Door.’

The door opened, letting in the sights, sounds, and smells of one of the major battles of the 19th century. Thousands of voices rose over the sound of cannon fire. The thunder of hooves caused the ground to shake. The sharp smell of gunpowder hung in the air.

As if in a dream, arm outstretched like a blind man, Mr Brown moved slowly towards the open door.

‘Everyone please remain where you are,’ said Major Guthrie sharply, drawing his weapon.

Dr Bairstow closed the door and rose from his seat. ‘Major, I must ask you to surrender your weapon.’

‘I’m afraid I’m quite unable to do that, sir.’

‘I accept your instinct and training make it difficult for you to comply, but one of our cardinal rules is that no harm must ever come to a contemporary at our hands. I cannot emphasise the importance of that rule too strongly. If your life is in danger you may take steps to protect yourself with pepper spray, or a stun gun of some kind, but you must understand that killing a contemporary can have the gravest consequences. Please remember it is well known that the act of observing changes that which is being observed. We always, therefore, try to keep our interaction with contemporaries to an absolute minimum. Our primary function is to observe, record, and document. Nothing else. Therefore, Major, I must ask you, in the interests of everyone’s safety, to surrender your gun to me, please.’

He held out his hand as he spoke.

Still Major Guthrie hesitated. ‘My priority, sir, is the safety of my employers.’

‘As is mine. The people here are the potential source of my funding. I would be very distressed if anything should happen to them and I had to begin again.’

Unseen, Mrs Green smiled faintly.

Dr Bairstow continued. ‘Major, I understand your reluctance, but if you attempt to shoot a contemporary, then History will act to defend itself and you will be dead before such a thing can happen. And possibly your employers will be as well. And if you shoot *me* you will, all of you, be here for the rest of your lives because only I can operate this pod. So, again, Major – your gun, please.’

Reluctantly, Major Guthrie removed the clip, broke open the gun,

and passed it over.

‘Thank you, Major. I appreciate your good faith. As you can see, I shall simply place it here in this locker for safety. You can access it at any time. I trust you not to do so. And now, with the assistance of Mr Black, shall we endeavour to make sense of what is occurring here today?’

He indicated the left-hand seat as he spoke and after only the briefest pause, Mr Black took his place.

‘You can angle the cameras, and zoom in and pan out by toggling these control keys here.’

Mr Black visibly swallowed and then, tentatively at first, but with growing confidence, began to range the camera back and forth, making some notes on a pad of paper that Dr Bairstow found for him. Eventually, he cleared his throat and said, in an artificially high voice, ‘Napoleon Bonaparte has escaped from Elba and, in another attempt to make France the most powerful nation in Europe, he has resumed war against the European powers.’

He stopped, cleared his throat again, and continued. ‘A coalition is formed, consisting of Britain, Prussia, the Netherlands, Hanover, Nassau, and Brunswick, under the joint command of Field Marshals Wellington and Blücher.

He stared at the screen for a while. Dr Bairstow, who had spent some time studying this event thoroughly and who could have enlightened him, remained silent.

‘I believe, yes ... I believe we are witnessing ... yes ... there ...’ he pointed at the screen. ‘That’s the 92nd – the Gordon Highlanders. General Pack ordered them to charge, but they’d already lost nearly half their strength in a prior engagement at Quatre Bras. They’ve fielded less than three hundred men today.’

They watched in silence as the Highlanders moved up, four lines deep, to close with the enemy some thirty yards away, advancing into a hail of French fire.

Mr Black said quietly, ‘There’s rather a difference between reading the reports that say they were badly knocked about and actually seeing that happen in front of one’s eyes. Things are rather bloody down there, aren’t they? You can see, they’re falling apart in some disorder. Poor devils ... they’re certainly taking a bashing.’

There was silence in the pod. The Highlanders were indeed taking a bashing. On the screen, without a sound, men hurled themselves at their enemies, bayonets fixed, mouths open in silent screams, advancing without hesitation into a barrage of fire. Tiny puffs of smoke bloomed and it was as if they had run into a wall. Simultaneously, the front row flung up their arms and fell. Then the second row. All in complete silence. Everywhere the eye looked, men

were dropping to the ground and not getting up again. Huge holes opened up in the lines as soldiers fell by the score. Desperately, the Highlanders struggled on but, inevitably, the moment came when they could go no further.

Dr Bairstow, who had stepped back to make room, was watching them all very carefully; waiting for the moment when it would dawn on them, as it must, that these were not pages in a History book, or even prints on an office wall. These were real people – struggling, striving, and dying. Here was fear and pain and mutilation and death.

Under heavy fire, the Highlanders were retreating over the bodies of the fallen.

‘And not a moment too soon,’ murmured Mr Black.

More French forces burst through the hedge behind which they had been concealed and fell upon them. Caught in a deadly crossfire, their attempt to retreat in good order was abandoned. Officers screamed their orders. Sustaining even heavier losses, the Highlanders were routed.

Silence filled the pod. Three people could not look away. Mrs Green gripped the edge of the console.

‘I had no idea,’ whispered Mr Brown. ‘This is ... unbelievable.’

‘I knew Wellington described the battle as “a damned close-run thing”,’ said Mr Black, seemingly unable to tear his eyes away, ‘but I had no idea they came so close to defeat. Look, the entire centre is beginning to give way. This is a disaster. Is there some way I can get a close up? Focus on that part of the battle?’

‘Allow me,’ said Dr Bairstow, leaning over his shoulder.

Without warning, faces filled the screen. Real faces, running with blood. Eyes white in smoke-blackened faces. Mouths open, although whether in ferocity or terror was hard to see. Three people jerked back. Someone drew in their breath with a sharp hiss.

‘Re-form. Re-form your lines, for God’s sake,’ croaked Mr Brown.

‘They will,’ said Mr Black. ‘This is the 92nd. The Highlanders. They have been ordered to hold and hold they will. The few that are left.’ He stared at the slaughter on the screen.

‘Surely,’ whispered Mrs Green. ‘They cannot withstand much more. They must give way.’

Mr Brown stared at the screen. ‘If the farmhouse at La Haye Sainte falls ...’

‘You know that it will not,’ murmured Dr Bairstow.

‘How can you say that, man? Look at them. They’re being cut to pieces. There can surely be no way back from ...’

Unseen bugles sounded.

‘What’s happening?’ said Mr Brown.

‘There! There! See! General Picton’s men are on the move. Here we

go. My God, this is it. I can hardly believe ... Look. Look there.'

From behind the top of the rise, there appeared a row of heads.

The heads became men.

Who, in turn, became mounted men.

The Scots Greys were on the move.

This was no desperate charge. There was no headlong gallop to engage the enemy. The ground was too broken, too uneven. Mud, bodies, even crops rendered a charge impractical.

The Scots Greys advanced at a walk, swords drawn, passing quietly through the still-retreating Highlanders. The horses, snorting with the smell of blood in their nostrils, picked their way over the fallen, held in hard by their riders.

Voices shouted new commands. The Highlanders rallied. Turning to face the enemy once more, they settled their bonnets firmly over their eyes and brought up their weapons. There were so few of them left that they could, legitimately, have fallen back to nurse their wounds. They did not.

Every Highlander who could seized a stirrup with one hand and took a tight grip on his rifle with the other. More bugles sounded and the pod was filled with voices shouting, 'Scotland Forever!'

The scarlet-coated Scots Greys picked up the pace to a fast walk, emerging through the dust and smoke to confront the enemy like a vision from hell.

The French 45th Regiment of the Line, still struggling to reform their square, looked up to see their death approaching. An unstoppable wave of giant white horses, all bared teeth and iron hooves, bearing down upon them. Each horse was bloodied to the knees, eyes wild with battle fury and ridden by an enormous, red-coated man, sword drawn and murder in his eyes.

Still clinging to the stirrups, the remnants of the Highlanders entered the fray. Slow, stately, and unstoppable, they bore down on the frantically struggling French forces.

In vain did the French officers scream new orders. There was no time. The enemy was already upon them. In desperation, many of them ran about, physically pushing their men into place. A regimental square, once formed, is well-nigh invincible to cavalry. A square in disorder is a sitting target.

The Scots Greys rode them down, forcing their way into the very heart of the French ranks. Men disappeared under horses' hooves. Those who by some miracle had managed to remain on their feet were cut down in an instant. The cavalry had a huge advantage over the infantry. Even standing on tiptoe and lunging with their bayonets at full thrust, the infantry could not reach the riders. Confused and milling around in complete disorder, they were hacked to pieces by

the Scots Guards' sabres and trampled into the ground by their horses.

It was over within minutes. The entire square was destroyed.

On the screen, a lone rider broke into a canter, pulling away from his comrades.

'There!' cried Mr Black. 'Look! That must be Charles Ewart. Quick! Quick! I want to see.'

Dr Bairstow adjusted the controls and the cameras zoomed in. A sergeant brandishing a sabre was urging his horse through the French lines, hacking about him like a lunatic. Soldiers fell away on both sides.

'He's after their Eagle. They'll make him an officer for this. Go on, man. Go on.'

A tiny group of men encircled the battle standard, defending it to the death.

One brave Frenchman closed in and a slash from Ewart took him through the head.

From nowhere, a lancer flung his lance at the red-coated sergeant who parried it with his sword, all the time urging his horse towards the Eagle.

'Look out!'

Another French soldier coolly knelt, took aim, and fired. At that range, he could not miss, but he somehow did. His bad aim cost him his life. Before he could reload, Ewart was upon him. Struggling to his feet, the French soldier stood his ground, stabbing wildly with his bayonet. His thrust was parried by Ewart, who, in one movement, cut him down and reached out for the battle standard.

'Go on, man. Go on.'

With his horse's momentum carrying him forwards, Ewart dropped his reins, stood in his stirrups, and seized the standard with one hand, thrusting at the bearer with the other. The man fell backwards. The Eagle was won.

A mighty roar went up as, sword in one hand and brandishing the captured Eagle in the other, Ewart turned and galloped back towards his own lines.

Inside the pod, three people suddenly realised they had been holding their breath.

'Look,' said Mrs Green suddenly, 'this isn't right, surely? What is happening?'

The tides of fortune can turn in the blink of an eye and now it was the turn of the Scots Greys to find themselves in trouble.

They watched the screen as the troopers, now free from obstacles, picked up speed and charged headlong towards General Durutte's infantry, who, unlike their unfortunate colleagues in the 45th, had had the time to form their square. Disorganised and out of control, the

Scots Guards swept ineffectively around the outside, unable to penetrate the square and incurring heavy losses. Men and horses crashed to the ground under a hail of gunfire.

Mr Black pointed. 'Their commander, Colonel Hamilton, will urge them on to engage the French artillery. See, there they go.'

In silence, they watched a small group peel away and thunder up the facing slope to engage a field battery of French cannon. Their success, however, was their undoing.

Mr Black sighed. 'As Wellington himself said, "The British cavalry never knows when to stop," and he was right. Watch.'

On the screen, the Scots Greys, their horses blown, and unable to rally, were taking heavy fire. The French cavalry, in a frenzy of revenge and retribution, fell upon them. The fighting was vicious and bloody. Colonel Hamilton was seen briefly, wounded in both arms and holding the reins in his teeth, attempting to lead his men back to safety. The French cavalry, 'The 4th Lancers, I think, but I am not sure,' murmured Mr Black, closed in.

Dr Bairstow, his objective gained, turned the cameras away, pulling back from the slaughter and muting the sound. Once again, tiny figures silently filled the screen.

'The Scots Greys were three hundred and ninety men strong,' said Mr Black, quietly. 'One hundred and two men died. Another ninety-eight were wounded.'

'True,' said Dr Bairstow, 'but by engaging the infantry and forcing them to turn to receive their attack, they caused them to be exposed to the Royal Dragoons who will rout them. Yes, things fell apart, but the centre held. And now will begin the attack on La Haye Sainte.'

Again, the screen was filled with cotton-wool puffs of cannon smoke. Occasionally, the pod trembled.

'Should we raise our shields?' asked Mr Brown, anxiously.

Dr Bairstow withdrew his gaze from the screen and regarded him with polite incomprehension. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Our shields. We do have shields, don't we?'

'I must confess I'm not entirely sure to what you are referring. Do you perhaps mean some kind of force field?'

'Exactly.'

'Something that would prevent us being blown to pieces by stray cannon shot?'

'Yes, that's it.'

'No, we don't have anything like that.'

'We don't? But what happens if we're hit? What keeps us safe?'

Dr Bairstow shrugged. 'A combination of sturdy construction, a very carefully calculated landing site, and the erratic protection of the god of historians.'

‘I wonder,’ said Mr Brown, diffidently. ‘Would it be possible to go outside?’

Mr Black and Mrs Green turned astonished eyes upon him.

Dr Bairstow smile faintly. ‘Not that I wish to appear selfish in any way, sir, but should anything happen to you then my chances of getting this project off the ground would be severely jeopardised.’

Mr Brown, who against all the laws of nature appeared to have shed at least twenty years in the last twenty minutes, grinned like a naughty boy. ‘My dear sir, to paraphrase, I invite you to consider the implications to your project of *not* letting us out for a better look.’

‘Mr Brown, I suspect you may be a closet historian.’

Another bombardment shook the pod and Mrs Green, still watching the screen, pointed. ‘Look. Who are they? Are they French? They’re coming this way.’

Three figures appeared out of nowhere. They were running very fast as explosions were peppering the ground all around them. They appeared to be wearing modern body armour and helmets. One of them, either in an attempt to avoid the bombardment or through disorientation, was zigzagging wildly. The other two seemed to be attempting to keep him on track. They were heading for the pod.

‘Who are they?’

Dr Bairstow sighed. ‘I suppose it was inevitable.’

They watched as the three figures ran, ducking and weaving, to the pod. Someone thumped on the door.

‘Could you let us in, please?’

‘They’re very polite. Who are they? What do we do?’

Dr Bairstow smiled faintly. ‘They’re historians and I suggest we let them in before they have the door off its hinges.’

Two men and one woman tumbled into the pod. Which was now distinctly overcrowded.

‘Bloody bollocking hell,’ said the woman, pulling off a helmet, and displaying the worst case of helmet hair ever. ‘That last bombardment started early. I’m going to have a word or two with the professor when we get back.’

‘Good afternoon.’

The three newcomers froze, staring alternately at the original occupants and then at each other in some consternation.

‘Quite,’ said Dr Bairstow. ‘I am not familiar with any of you – yet – but your discretion would be appreciated.’

‘Of course ... sir.’

‘Report.’

‘Er ... Maxwell and Bashford, sir. Historians. Markham providing security.’

Dr Bairstow passed her some water. ‘How interesting. You bring

security guards with you on assignments?’

She passed the water to Bashford. ‘We have to, sir. God knows what they’d get up to if we left them behind on their own.’

Markham grinned amiably. ‘Don’t you believe it, sir. No one in their right minds would let the History Department out by themselves.’ He took a large swig of water and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. ‘That’s better. Thank you very much.’

Dr Bairstow regarded the third member of the trio with some concern. ‘Mr ... Bashford appears to have incurred some sort of injury. Shrapnel?’

‘He fell over, sir. And it’s Bashford. He could concuss himself on a ball of cotton wool. Frankly, if he spends much more time in a semi-conscious stupor then ... the Boss ... is going to stop paying him altogether.’

Markham, who had been beaming at a stony-faced Major Guthrie, said suddenly, ‘Don’t see why he shouldn’t, actually. He barely pays *me*. Why should I suffer alone?’

Dr Bairstow said gently, ‘Really? That seems most unfair. Why would that be?’

‘Bloody Deductions from Wages to Pay for Damages Incurred forms, sir. Bane of my life. And a completely necessary and fair system of reimbursement, of course, as I frequently maintain.’

‘Deductions from Wages forms,’ said Dr Bairstow quietly. ‘How very ... innovative. And are they frequently implemented?’

‘Distressingly frequently, sir.’

‘Well stop bloody breaking things, then,’ said Bashford, blinking fuzzily at him.

‘I don’t. It’s not my fault that ...’

Dr Bairstow cleared his throat, interrupting what was threatening to become a vigorous, though possibly irrelevant, debate.

‘Can we assume that you are here for the same purpose as we are?’

‘Er ...’

‘You may speak freely.’

‘Recording and documenting, sir, yes.’

‘And not dying?’

She wiped her face. ‘Well, no thanks to Professor Rapson, sir. We were told we’d have more than enough time after the Scots Greys’ charge to get into position to watch Marshall Ney having a pop at La Haye Sainte. As it turned out, however, not quite. We’re pretty sure the professor doesn’t measure time in quite the same way as everyone else.’ She took another swallow of water. ‘Anyway, thanks for the respite, sir. We should be getting a shift on. We’re supposed to be covering Wellington’s infantry forming squares in preparation for the attack.’

‘Yes, said Bashford, unexpectedly proving he wasn’t as dopey as he looked. ‘The artillery is in place and we don’t want the others getting all the good stuff. Time to go.’

‘Just as a matter of interest, how many of you are there?’

‘Um, well, including the Security Section and all the techies we had to bring in case we broke something, um, seventeen or eighteen, I think. There’s a lot of ground to cover out there.’

‘Don’t forget Professor Rapson and Dr Dowson, Max.’

‘Both of whom I intend to have a word with later on. About nineteen or twenty, then.’

Mr Black turned from the screen in astonishment. ‘Twenty people? You brought *twenty people*?’

‘We did, yes. And there’s probably a lot more around that we don’t know about. It’s a big day today, you know. There’s upwards of a hundred thousand people down there. I’d be surprised if a good number of them weren’t from –’

Dr Bairstow made a warning gesture.

‘Weren’t colleagues in some form or another.’

‘And the Time Police, of course, making sure we don’t bugger things up,’ said Markham, cheerfully.

‘Speaking of which ...’ said Bashford, picking up his helmet.

‘Yes, we must go. Point Bashford in the right direction, will you?’

‘No need. I think he operates on some sort of autopilot.’

‘I heard that,’ he said indignantly.

‘Just as a matter of interest, sir, why are *you* here?’

‘We have been observing the Stirrup Charge of the Scots Greys.’

She regarded their civilian clothing with some astonishment. ‘You mean you all thought you’d just stroll into a pod and pop off to Waterloo?’

‘That would be correct, yes,’ said Dr Bairstow and those who knew him well might have caught an unusually mischievous note in his voice.

Maxwell grinned hugely. ‘You do know that’s a massive breach of regulations, don’t you, sir? I shall have no choice but to report it on my return. There is every possibility you may never hear the last of this.’

‘I very much hope that will turn out to be the case. Would I be wasting my breath if I told you to take care?’

They nodded, innocence oozing from every pore.

‘Well, don’t let us keep you,’ said Dr Bairstow gently.

‘Very considerate of you – our boss is a stickler for punctuality.’

‘I am very glad to hear it.’

She smiled and they shook hands. ‘It’s been an honour and a privilege, sir.’

The landscape outside was suddenly peppered with explosions.

‘I shouldn’t hang around if I were you. It’s going to be quite lively here in a few minutes.’

‘Consider us gone, sir.’

And with a brief flurry of activity – they were.

Dr Bairstow watched them go, a rare smile on his lips. Reaching down, he adjusted a control on the console.

In the distance, a faint voice could be heard instructing Bashford to put on his helmet for God’s sake before his head fell off.

Back in the pod, Mr Black turned to Dr Bairstow. ‘What a very odd bunch.’

‘Did you think so?’

‘And they were historians?’

‘I believe so.’

‘Not what I was expecting.’

‘They very rarely are.’

On their return, the passengers stared at the screen. A cold, dark London day was drawing to a close. The rain came down harder.

Mrs Green stirred. ‘Somehow this seems ...’

‘Less real?’

She nodded, not taking her eyes from the screen.

‘A common phenomenon. Somewhat similar to exiting a cinema, I always think. Please, take as much time as you need to reorient yourselves. In the meantime, we must undertake a small procedure. Please do not be alarmed.’

The interior of the pod lit with a cold, blue glow. Mrs Green shivered.

‘What was that?’ demanded Major Guthrie, sharply.

‘Decontamination. Not strictly necessary, since you did not leave the pod, but you did interact with those who had. Merely a safety precaution.’

Mr Brown sighed.

‘The Stirrup Charge. It did happen after all.’

‘Yes, it did.’

‘But not quite as we thought.’

‘We frequently find that although things do happen, they don’t happen quite as we expected them to. However, the important thing here is not that it happened, but that you, Mr Black, now *know* that it happened. You may find that you look at your prints with new eyes.’

‘I think, from now on, I shall look at everything with new eyes.’

‘Then the day has not been wasted.’

‘I hope those young people made it safely to wherever they were going.’

‘Oh, I’m sure they will. Have. Did. And now, if you are quite ready, I shall open the door.’

Major Guthrie collected his gun. ‘Thank you sir, a most interesting experience.’

Mr Brown and Mr Black stood in the doorway, looking out into the darkening evening.

‘Are you ready, Mrs Green?’

‘One moment, if you please, I would like to speak with Dr Bairstow. Please do not let me keep you.’

Mr Black turned back for a moment, almost as if he was about to say something, and then the two of them, together with Major Guthrie, exited the pod and set off across the car park.

Mrs Green stopped at the door and looked back at Dr Bairstow who was shutting things down.

He paused and said quietly, ‘Is there a problem? You seem ... upset.’

She seemed to be groping for words. ‘I did not expect it to be so ...’

‘What? Magnificent? Tragic? Wasteful? Horrifying? Spectacular?’

‘Yes. No. That such courage, so many good qualities, courage, spirit, and dedication, should be wasted on something as futile a war.’

‘You are perfectly correct, madam, but those qualities are not used solely for war. And even field marshalls are human. Have you never heard the story of the Duke of Wellington and the toad?’

She managed to laugh a little. ‘No, I’ve never heard the story of Wellington and the toad.’

‘Well, it tells us that the Iron Duke was walking along the road one day when he came across a small boy in tears. Rather to his own surprise, I suspect, he stopped and enquired what was the matter. The little boy, not knowing whom he was talking, told him that he was going away to school the next day and was worried that no one would look after his toad properly. The Duke offered to take the toad under his own care. A week or so later, while at school, the boy received a message which read, “*Field Marshall the Duke of Wellington presents his compliments and has the pleasure to inform you that your toad is well.*”’

Now she laughed.

‘And even those considered villains do not invariably display villainous qualities. Napoleon himself was moved to tears by the sight of a soldier’s dog standing guard over his dead master. He frequently said he was haunted by the memory for the rest of his life.’

She sighed. ‘War is such a dreadful waste.’

‘Can I assume you lost someone in the recent civil unrest?’

‘Most of my family. Everyone, except for my youngest son.’

‘My sympathies for your loss.’

She said in sudden anger. ‘They call it civil unrest because it sounds better than civil war.’ She took a deep breath. ‘I’m sorry. I am usually

more controlled than this.'

Dr Bairstow smiled sadly. 'I said before that the act of observing changes that which is observed. It is also true to say that the observer does not remain unchanged, either. You look very pale. May I fetch you some water?'

She sipped it slowly. 'It's always all about war, isn't it?'

'Not at all. Yes, we observe battlefields – they are generally important events – but it's not all about that. We will investigate coronations, social conditions, industrial events, legends – the list is quite long. I'm sorry today's demonstration was not to your taste.'

'Oh no, no. It was ...' she paused.

'Horrible?'

'I was going to say fascinating.'

'Horribly fascinating then.'

She laughed.

'What would you like to see, Mrs Green? With all of History out there ... If you could choose – what would you choose?'

She thought for a moment. 'Actually, it's not so far from what we saw today. I'd like to see the Duchess of Richmond's ball in Brussels. When the cream of European society was gathered together and Wellington received the news that Napoleon had outwitted him. To see his face. And the faces of those around him. Excited young boys off to war. Sweethearts saying goodbye and trying to be brave. Mothers hiding their tears and fears. Fathers – proud and afraid at the same time – so yes, still Waterloo, but the other side of Waterloo.' She looked at him shyly. 'I always think History is more about people than events, don't you?'

'Yes – and no. Yes, we study the events but it is people who are the cause of those events. It always comes down to cause and effect.'

They both fell silent, not looking at each other.

'Would you – perhaps one day – would you like me to ...?' he paused and visibly squared his shoulders. 'Mrs Green – you *shall* go to the ball.'

She laughed. 'Very well. I shall look forward to it.'

'It won't be for a while, I'm afraid. There is much for me to do.'

She smiled. 'I can wait.'

'Not for too long, I hope.'

'No, I hope not. And Mrs Green is not my real name, you know.'

He affected astonishment. 'Really?'

'And I suspect Bairstow is not yours.'

'My name is Edward.'

'Angela.'

Back at Britannic Enterprises, three hugely important civil servants,

one young major, and the future Director of St Mary's were being ruthlessly ministered to by Mr Strong who was fussing gently with teacups and messages.

'Let me see, sir. Section Four rang. Normal service will recommence at 1800 hours tonight. The PM has been informed. And I've passed that other matter over to Section Two, sir. It did appear to require immediate but discreet attention and I considered them the best able to deal with the job. I trust all this is acceptable?'

'Thank you, Mr Strong. All perfectly acceptable as usual.'

Dr Bairstow, stirring his tea, watched all this with quiet attention. Standing to take his leave, he took advantage of Mr Strong helping him with his overcoat to request a quiet word with him.

'Of course, sir. My shift ends in twenty minutes.'

'I shall wait outside for you.'

'You don't want to hang around in the cold, sir. I'll meet you in The Flying Duck.'

The Flying Duck was easily located, situated as it was in the shadow of Battersea Power Station. Inside was steamy and warm. The evening trade had not yet begun and Dr Bairstow was easily able to find a quiet corner table. He ordered two pints and waited patiently.

But not for long. Mr Strong shrugged off a shabby mac and sat down. Seen up close, he displayed all the traditional signs of pride and poverty. His shirt spotless and the cuffs frayed. His shoes ancient and well polished. His jacket had one or two small holes in the sleeve, which had been very carefully mended. He wore a military tie. His hair was neat and brushed. It was easy to picture him in some cold, damp lodging somewhere, carefully laying out his shabby clothes every night, brushing his shoes, trimming his moustache, all ready for the next day's work. Clinging to old standards because they were all he had left.

Conscious that the silence had gone on too long, Dr Bairstow sought for an opening to the conversation.

'The Flying Duck? I had not realised that was an actual name. I thought it was just an expression.'

'Well, I don't know about that, sir, but I do know you heard it around here a lot a couple of years ago. Especially in connection with the old government, if you get my drift.'

'I do indeed. Of course, this was the site of the famous Battersea Barricades. Were you present at the time?'

'I certainly was, sir. Did my bit on the East Wall.'

'I understand the fighting was particularly heavy there.'

'You got that right, sir. Saw a lot of friends fall, I did.'

'Tell me, would I be right in thinking the East Wall was commanded by Theresa Mack?'

‘That’s right, sir. Stood shoulder to shoulder with her at the end. Don’t mind telling you, I thought my last hour had come. But it hadn’t. Not yet, anyway.’

‘Do you know where I can find Miss Mack?’

‘Mrs, sir. Mrs Mack. Went back to Cardiff, I believe.’

‘Interesting. Now, Mr Strong, you must be wondering why I have asked you here. I have a proposition for you.’

He spoke for some time while Mr Strong sat quietly, sipping his pint, and listening. At the end, without saying anything, he picked up both glasses and went to the bar. Returning, he put two glasses on the table and seated himself again.

Neither man spoke for some time. Dr Bairstow sat waiting.

Eventually, Mr Strong sighed quietly and returned from wherever he had been. A light shone in his eyes that had not been there before. He said quietly, ‘I’d have to give a month’s notice, of course.’

Dr Bairstow lifted his glass and silently toasted him. He left Mr Strong snugly ensconced in his corner with a third pint in front of him and made his way through the cold streets back to the pod. Once there, he pulled out his notebook and reviewed the list of seven names contained therein. Key personnel, all of them. To be hunted down – he mentally crossed out ‘hunted down’ and substituted ‘located’ – and persuaded to join him. Some would be easier than others, but he had the first.

One.

And yet another meeting. One in a series of many as Dr Bairstow inched his way towards achieving his aims. As always, the office and its occupants seemed unchanged and unchanging. An acute observer, however, might have noticed that Mrs Green had a new hairstyle.

Dr Bairstow, while aware that by normal government standards, events were proceeding at the speed of light, could not help just the occasional twinge of what, in a lesser man, could be classed as impatience. Today, however, was different. There was a definite feeling that, after the jump to Waterloo, a corner had been turned.

‘Dr Bairstow, arising from our last meeting, we have given some thought as to where you and your organisation should be situated. After a great deal of discussion, we would like to offer you a choice of properties we feel would be appropriate for your needs.’

Dr Bairstow arranged his features into something that might, in the dark, resemble an expression of anticipation. ‘A choice? How exciting.’

‘We have here,’ Mr Black passed over a folder, ‘a disused castle in Scotland. Very remote. Security would not be an issue. Or here,’ another folder was pushed across the table, ‘St Mary’s Priory, just outside of Rushford. A little dilapidated, but easily reclaimable. Or,’

he produced a third folder, 'a modern warehouse complex just outside of Barnstaple, although that would need extensive refurbishment to be suitable for your purposes.'

Dr Bairstow made no move to pick up the folders. 'While each property has its own merits, I believe St Mary's Priory can offer me exactly what I need.'

Mr Brown blinked. 'Don't you want to inspect any of these properties before making a decision?'

'Thank you, but no. I have been familiar with St Mary's for some years now.'

'Ah. Yes, of course. I should warn you however, the premises are in a state of some disrepair.'

Dr Bairstow sighed. 'They always are, sir. They always are.'

On his way out, Dr Bairstow requested the pleasure of a few words with the major. In private.

'If you would care to step into my office, sir ...'

Major Guthrie opened a door to yet another small, dusty room and offered his guest a chair.

Dr Bairstow settled himself. 'Please do not construe this as any sort of criticism, but you're very young to be a major.'

'Promotion by attrition, sir. There weren't many of us left at the end.'

'So I have heard.' He regarded his stick for a moment and then said, 'Well, Major, at long last, it looks as if my unit will have a home.'

'Congratulations, sir. It's been a long time coming.'

'It has indeed, but I think I am now well on my way, and arising out of that, I wonder if you might like to consider alternative employment.'

'Another office job, sir?'

'Oh dear me, no. Rest assured this would easily be as hazardous as anything to which you have been accustomed. Unit security will form part of your duties, but your main function will be to prevent a group of gifted but not always very sensible young people from killing themselves, levelling their immediate surroundings, and destroying the fabric of space and time as we know it. There will be days when you are not sure whether to shoot them or yourself. I beg that you will do neither. You will frequently operate away from the unit and must rely on your own judgment and abilities to see you through. As will everyone around you. Rely on you, I mean. The responsibilities will be enormous and the pay in no way commensurate with them.'

'How incommensurate?'

'Meagre.'

'How meagre is meagre?'

‘More meagre than you have been accustomed to.’

‘I’m a serving officer in His Majesty’s Forces, sir. You’d be amazed how familiar I am with meagre.’

Dr Bairstow smiled, but said nothing.

‘This is about what happened the other day, isn’t it, sir? When we went off to Waterloo?’

‘It is. I am, I think, very close to securing my funding but one of the many conditions, I am sure, will relate to security. I hope to allay any fears by being able to assure the authorities that all security issues are in your capable hands. I have seen your files, Major, and your achievements are impressive. I have no hesitation, therefore, in making you this offer.’

‘And my current employers?’

Your current employers will, I think, be reassured that security issues will be handled by one whom they know to be trustworthy.’

‘Well, I’ll confess, Dr Bairstow that while peace is very pleasant ...’

‘It’s not very exciting. Major, if excitement is what you’re after, I believe I may have the very thing.’

‘Could I choose my own team?’

‘Almost certainly. Do you have anyone in mind?’

‘One or two, yes. Including that young man you met the other day.’

‘Mr ... Markham?’

‘You would not object?’

‘Is there any reason why I should?’

‘Perhaps you should read his file first.’

He unlocked a filing cabinet and passed over a folder.

Dr Bairstow read quietly. ‘A most unfortunate start to a young life.’

‘He’s just beginning to find his way, I think.’

‘He certainly found his way rather quickly through officer school.’

‘The blaze was soon contained, sir. And it was rather an ingenious solution to the problem in hand. And as he himself argued, who knew the flames would spread so quickly?’

‘Well, we both saw him the other day, large as life and twice as dirty, so we must assume, therefore, that I say yes.’

‘He was part of the team I brought with me when I was transferred to London and I would like to keep him with me.’

Dr Bairstow nodded. ‘I believe I can provide an environment in which he can thrive. I should perhaps warn you both, however, that I am very much a “one strike and you’re out” employer. You will find that while I am prepared to walk through fire for my people, I have no hesitation, should they cross me, in using their bodies to feed the fire through which I should be walking.’

Major Guthrie closed his eyes briefly. ‘Please don’t mention fire and Markham in the same sentence.’

Dr Bairstow smiled politely and returned the file. 'Well?'

'Count me in, sir.'

Two.

One month later, a coach drew up outside the locked gates of St Mary's Priory. After a while, the driver turned off the engine and waited patiently while everyone blamed everyone else for not having the keys.

Dr Bairstow sat quietly in the front seat while Major Guthrie's small team milled around outside the bus. As far as he could ascertain on such short acquaintance, their names were Weller, Ritter, Markham, Murdoch, Evans and Randall. They represented the entire spectrum of shapes, sizes, and colours, from the big rumbling giant imaginatively named Big Dave Murdoch, to the small, scruffy individual at the back who, at a nod from Guthrie, bent over to inspect the padlock. In a disturbingly short space of time, he had pulled the chain free and handed it to the major.

'Sorry sir. Came off in my hand.'

They climbed noisily back into the bus. Carefully blank faced, Major Guthrie handed both chain and padlock to Dr Bairstow who accepted them without comment.

St Mary's Priory was a long, low building, not more than three storeys high at its tallest point. Small windows caught the sunlight as the coach zigzagged slowly up the potholed drive. The remains of formal gardens could still be seen. To one side, a reed-smothered lake hosted an impressive number of swans who had no idea what was about to hit them.

Markham said, for the first and last time in his life, that he liked swans.

Tall chimneys rose from a shallow roof and the whole building was smothered in Virginia Creeper, just beginning to show new green leaves in the spring sunshine.

From the back of the bus, Markham could be heard enthusiastically comparing the building to a haunted house and enquiring whether there was a ghost.

Alighting carefully, Dr Bairstow stood quietly looking around. A man gazing at the unfamiliarly familiar. He was recalled by creaking hinges and a dragging noise as finally, with some effort and bad language, the front doors were persuaded to open.

Markham, surging forwards, was restrained by Major Guthrie. 'After you, Dr Bairstow.'

Slowly, Dr Bairstow mounted the shallow steps, paused for a moment, and then stepped from sunshine into shadow.

He was conscious of a familiar smell. Damp stone, dust, stale air,

and old wood. He tilted his head as if listening and just momentarily, he caught the sound of footsteps clattering on a wooden staircase, voices raised in amiable dispute, a door slamming and somewhere unseen, a small explosion: an echo from the future perhaps.

Becoming aware of the silence around him, he turned.

‘Well, gentlemen. Welcome to St Mary’s. This is the Great Hall. The kitchens and dining room will be down there. The Library through there. These rooms off to the left will be the Wardrobe Department. R&D is up the stairs and over to the right. Please find yourselves somewhere to put your gear and let us begin.’

‘I’ll put the kettle on,’ said Markham.

Exactly seven days later, Dr Bairstow was facing a minor uprising. A small space had been cleared in the dining room, a table set up, and Markham was serving an optimistically named chicken stew.

Murdoch prodded his carefully. ‘I’m almost certain this sort of thing is banned under the Geneva Convention.’

Randall was heard to enquire whether something had escaped from Quatermass and The Pit.

‘It’s nutritious,’ said Markham indignantly.

‘It’s grey. No food should be grey.’

‘I think mine just twitched,’ said Evans. ‘Should I stun it, do you think?’

‘It’s cheap,’ said Markham, marshalling his secondary arguments.

‘I’m sure it’s delicious,’ said Dr Bairstow. He took a dubious forkful, chewed valiantly for some considerable time and swallowed. Six pairs of eyes watched him closely.

Delicately patting his mouth with a piece of kitchen roll, he rummaged in his wallet, eventually pulling out a credit card, which he handed to Major Guthrie.

‘Please ascertain the whereabouts of the nearest establishment prepared to deliver here and place an order with all speed.’

‘Hey,’ protested Markham. ‘I slaved for nearly twenty minutes over this.’

Dr Bairstow did not shudder. ‘And we are all deeply appreciative of your efforts. However, Major Guthrie advises me that while your enthusiasm is admirable, your talents are better employed in other parts of the building.’

‘But–’ wailed Markham, loyal to his culinary creation.

Randall passed over his dish. As did Ritter and Evans. Murdoch might possibly have followed suit, but his dish appeared to have welded itself to the table.

‘You eat it then,’ said Evans.

Markham surveyed the dishes before him, many of which were

forming a crust.

He sighed. 'Chicken and sweetcorn soup with a side order of pancake rolls. Beef and green peppers in oyster sauce. Sweet and sour pork balls. Egg fried rice and a double helping of prawn crackers. For my second course ...'

Emerging from the train station, Dr Bairstow stopped and looked around him. It was said that the first stirrings of resistance had been born on the night they threw the Fascists out of Cardiff, and there seemed no doubt that the city still bore the scars of that and subsequent fighting. Unlike in London, however, there were no building sites, no scaffolding, and no signs of regeneration. He saw rows of tents pitched wherever enough rubble had been cleared. There were no shops. Just a number of public washing and cooking facilities. He remembered the newspaper headline, 'Where did all the money go?' Not to Cardiff, that was obvious.

Consulting his map, he set off.

Thirty minutes walking brought him to a narrow street in Cathays. Possibly due to the high student population, this area had been particularly badly damaged. Most of the paving stones had been removed. Craters rendered the road undriveable. Some of the houses had no roofs and a number of canvas tarpaulins flapped in the wind.

Walking carefully along the right-hand side of the street, he counted the numbers on the front doors, stopping at one particular house about half way down. There, he knocked and waited.

The door was opened by a small woman with bright hair and tired eyes.

'Yes?

'I'm looking for Mrs Theresa Mack.'

'And you are?'

'My name is Edward Bairstow and I have come a very long way to speak to her.'

'From London?'

'That was part of my journey, yes.'

She sighed. 'You'd better come in.'

The front door opened straight into the living room.

There was no TV. No fire. No smell of cooking. One small lamp burned beside an armchair. An open book lay face down on the chair. A similar armchair was placed on the other side of the empty fireplace. A small table and two chairs stood under the window. A framed photograph of a young couple was the only decoration in the room.

Dr Bairstow paused beside the table, looked at the photograph, and said softly, 'I understand you are married.'

‘Widowed,’ she said curtly. ‘Please sit down.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. Was it in the recent fighting?’

‘At the Barricades, yes. He survived Cardiff and Monmouth and then fell right at the very end, in London. Almost as the surrender was announced. I could even hear the faint cheering far away over the bridge as the shot rang out. Five minutes later and everyone was shouting, “Cease fire!” and “Hooray!” but by then, of course, it was far too late.’

A long silence fell and eventually Dr Bairstow said, ‘I’ve just come from there.’

‘Have they rebuilt yet? I suppose priority goes to London.’

‘They have made a start, yes, but there’s not been a great deal of progress.’

‘There never is. Have you seen the state of Cardiff?’

‘My walk from the station offered me ample opportunity to see.’

‘So why are you here?’

‘I find myself in need of your expertise.’

‘I’m too old for all that now. The fight’s gone out of me.’

‘I take leave to doubt that. However, it is your former expertise that interests me at the moment.’

‘What – catering?’

‘Yes. I am currently establishing a small organisation and we have been catering for ourselves. Our efforts have not been as successful as I could have wished. My records show that you enjoyed considerable success in that field.’

‘Your records? Who are you? Show me some ID.’

‘Alas, I am unable to do so. I have none.’

She regarded him narrowly. ‘Do you work for the government?’

Just for a moment, he allowed himself a small gleam of amusement. ‘Actually I may have just persuaded them to work for me. They do, however, supply my funding – via a third party.’

She looked at him across the cold fireplace. It occurred to him the room was very quiet. Not even the ticking of a clock.

‘Who are you?’

‘I told you. My name is Edward Bairstow and while I am reluctant to paraphrase Winston Churchill in any way, I can offer you nothing except extremely hard work, difficult working conditions, and an occasionally hazardous environment.’

Receiving no indication of her response to this statement, he continued.

‘I am setting up an organisation, the details of which I cannot yet discuss with you. The unit will be situated in England. The work will be of a top-secret nature and my employees will require regular and frequent feeding. You would have complete control over your

department. I do not believe in micro managing. It will be chaotic. Food will be required at all hours of the day and night. And large quantities of it, too. Miracles will be demanded of you on a daily basis. You probably won't be paid regularly. There may be periods when you will not be paid at all.'

'Can I engage my own staff?'

'Within budgetary constraints, yes.'

'Will *they* be paid?'

'Probably not.'

She sat for a while in silence. Dr Bairstow, possibly a little more tired by his walk from the station than he was prepared to admit, also sat quietly.

'You can't tell me what you do?'

'No, I can't do that at the moment. But I can tell you what I won't do. I won't ever preside over an organisation that wants to put together a working party to investigate the possibility of setting up a steering group dedicated to considering the make-up of a proposed committee. In my own small way, I too am rebuilding, and I want people who will get things done. Are you one of those people?'

Her chin came up.

'When?'

'As soon as possible.'

'Wait here.'

She reappeared moments later with a small suitcase. Crossing to the table, she picked up the photograph and her book and carefully packed them away.

'I'm ready.'

They let themselves out of the front door. She locked it behind her and posted the keys back through the letterbox.

'Let's go.'

The two figures walked slowly down the street into the gathering night.

'Three.'

'What's that?'

'I beg your pardon. Just thinking aloud.'

And yet another long train journey. North, this time. Evicting, by sheer personality, a young man sitting in the seats clearly set aside for those physically unable to stand all the way to York, Dr Bairstow made himself comfortable and contemplated his strategy. A complete waste of time as it turned out.

Catching a local train he alighted at Thirsk and made his way across the Market Place, around the Clock Tower, and out towards the university – St James' campus.

Spring was springing as fast as it could go. Tubs of nodding daffodils stood on every street corner. A warm wind blew. For once, it wasn't raining.

The St James' buildings had sustained considerable damage. The Main Hall stood roofless. Every window was boarded up. To his right, the Barbeck Library was just a shell. Dr Bairstow stood at the entrance to the quadrangle, looking about him. An observer might have said he was remembering.

A college porter appeared from a doorway. 'Help you, sir?'

'I am here to see either Dr Dowson or Professor Rapson. Or both. Whichever is easier.'

The porter nodded back the way he had just come. 'Up the stairs and to your left, sir. You might want to proceed with caution.'

Thanking him, Dr Bairstow climbed the ancient staircase.

In contrast to the rest of the building, which reflected the grave silence of academia, the corridor at the top of the stairs was witnessing a great deal of activity. A line of gossiping students stood along one panelled wall, all with identical expressions of sheepishness and clutching bottles containing a familiar golden fluid.

Any doubts Dr Bairstow might have had over whether or not he was in the right place were immediately dispelled. At the exact moment he opened his mouth to make a polite enquiry of the nearest bottle-clutching student, there was a small, damp explosion and a cloud of evil-smelling, acrid smoke billowed from a doorway. Dr Bairstow closed his mouth, and waited for events to unfold.

A door on the other side of the corridor was hurled open with some force. The students, obviously familiar with the signs and mindful that there was bound to be a pub open somewhere, made themselves scarce.

A small, round man, spectacles balanced precariously on the end of his nose, bounced out into the corridor, waving his arms to dispel the evil vapours, and plunged into the fray.

'Andrew, you old fool, I warned you. Didn't I warn you?' He turned his head, addressing someone unseen. 'Mr Cameron, please telephone the Chancellor's office for me and remind them – again – of my urgent requests to be rehoused. No one should be expected to have to work opposite ... Andrew, what are you doing now? I demand you stop that at once. You'll blow us all to kingdom come.'

A furious pounding could be heard.

A voice said excitedly, 'I think I know where I went wrong.'

'You always say that.'

'Well, it's usually true, Octavius. I think this time I used a little too much urine and not enough toadstool.'

'For God's sake, Andrew, it's like a bloody witch's den in here. What

is this? And *this*? And don't tell me what *this* is because I don't want to know.'

A quiet voice said patiently, 'It's touchwood, Occy. You soak it in urine – lots of urine – pound the mixture into a kind of felt, and it smoulders. Portable fire. The Vikings used it a lot.'

'You are not a Viking. And the 21st century has gifted us with matches. And this did not smoulder. It exploded.'

'Yes, I think possibly the fault lies with poor quality urine. I blame the students, you know. It's probably about 90% alcohol. Really, when you think about it, an explosion was quite inevitable. I wonder if I could persuade them to stop drinking for a week or two?'

'Andrew, I sometimes think you've lost all touch with reality.'

'Well really, that's a little unkind. Actually, while you're here, Occy, I wonder if you'd be kind enough to donate ...'

At this moment, Dr Bairstow judged it politic to intervene.

Taking a spotless handkerchief from his pocket, he attached it to one end of his stick and gently waved it around the doorway.

'Gentlemen, may I enter?'

'Oh for heaven's sake, Andrew, you've blown up a civilian. Come in, sir. Are you hurt?'

'Not in any way, I assure you. May I enter?'

'Yes, of course. Andrew, please find the gentleman a chair.'

A tall and very thin man with Einstein hair, Professor Rapson looked vaguely around as if perhaps a chair could be found dangling from the ceiling. His hair was in disarray and the front of his white coat was speckled with something that should probably not be too closely examined.

'I am looking for Professor Rapson.'

'Oh. Yes. That's me. How do you do?' He began to move around the room, picking up shattered equipment and uttering small, distressed sounds. Pools of fluid dripped unhappily to the floor.

'Andrew, what are you doing?'

'I'm looking for the rest of the student donations and they don't appear to have survived.'

'Well thank God for that. Come and sit down for a moment, there's a good chap. You have a guest.'

'No, you don't understand. That was the last of ... Oh, well, never mind, there are many more of them waiting outside.'

'Alas, I fear that is no longer the case,' interrupted Dr Bairstow.

'Oh dear. Now what shall I do? I don't suppose, Occy ...'

'Absolutely not!'

He turned hopefully to Dr Bairstow. 'I wonder, sir, if I could trouble you ...'

There was a short pause. 'I'm afraid not.'

‘Oh well, I’ll just have to save up again, I suppose.’

He drooped dejectedly over the remains of a complicated glass retort.

Silence fell. And showed no signs of getting up again.

Since both of them appeared to have forgotten his presence, Dr Bairstow felt compelled to speak.

‘I am looking for Professor Andrew Rapson and Dr Octavius Dowson. I suspect that I have found them.’

‘You have indeed, sir. How can we assist you?’

‘Gentlemen, I have travelled here today to ask you, personally, whether you would be interested in joining my project. I cannot enter into any great detail at the moment, suffice to say that the work will be hazardous, noisy, a little disorganised, and extremely secret.’

It was as if a switch had been flicked. Both men stopped what they were doing and turned to fix him with stares of laser-like intensity. The two bickering academics might never have existed.

‘Why us?’

‘The University of Thirsk was the centre of resistance in this part of the country and, from reports I have read, the two of you were at the centre of the centre of resistance. The university suffered greatly because of its stand against the Fascist forces. I have in mind a scheme that will benefit everyone – me, you, and the university.’

Professor Rapson folded his arms. ‘Does the Chancellor know about this?’

‘She does. There have been extensive discussions.’

Dr Dowson smiled gently. ‘I imagine she couldn’t wait to be rid of us.’

‘Actually, no. She is greatly reluctant to lose either of you but she concedes the importance of my work and recognises your value to it.’

‘You haven’t told us yet what your project is.’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘Or where it is.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t tell you that, either. But it will be in this country.’

‘What will we be doing?’

‘I’m not yet at liberty to divulge that information.’

‘Can you give us any details at all?’

‘Not really, no.’

‘So, just to sum up – you want us to work on an unknown project in an unknown location?’

‘That is correct.’

‘And the work is hazardous ...?’

‘And noisy and disorganised.’

They looked at each other. ‘Anything else we should know?’

‘Regular wages will probably not happen.’

‘Well in that case ...’ They looked at each other and then back to Dr Bairstow, nodding enthusiastically. ‘We accept.’

‘Good.’ Dr Bairstow rose to his feet and retrieved his handkerchief. ‘I will contact you both shortly. Allow me to give you my card.’

Dr Dowson turned it over. ‘It’s just your name.’

‘That is correct. Gentlemen, I will be in touch.’

He turned and made his way back through the smoke and down the stairs. Pausing at the bottom to draw on his gloves, he groped for his notebook, made two ticks, and permitted himself a satisfied smile.

‘Four *and* five. Excellent progress.’

Time passed – and who would know that better than the occupants of St Mary’s?

The food improved immeasurably. Although as Mr Randall remarked, Mrs Mack could serve up a dead dog sandwich and it would still be a huge improvement on Markham’s efforts. A slight scuffle followed this statement.

A steady stream of vehicles weaved their way around the potholes, seeking to deliver their cargo under Mr Strong’s directions. Structural work began and was progressing well until the Society for the Protection of Historical Buildings turned up with their paperwork and put a stop to all that.

The library slowly began to take shape. It was Dr Bairstow’s opinion that the library might have taken shape a little less slowly if Dr Dowson could refrain from exclaiming in excitement and sitting down, task forgotten, to read some long-forgotten treasure.

Professor Rapson, for no good reason that anyone could see, had attempted the construction of an automated mangonel. The combination of a scale model and an old lawn mower engine proved too much for the internal walls of his laboratory, one of which collapsed under the bombardment. He was accused of attempting to demolish St Mary’s even before the cement had dried and, having been compelled to evacuate while the ceiling was propped up and other safety measures implemented, he retired, protesting, to assist Dr Dowson in the Library. The sounds of heated academic debate soon echoed around the building. As Major Guthrie said, however, it kept them both occupied and out of the way.

Living conditions remained somewhat spartan. St Mary’s, while continuing to absorb money at an astonishing rate, had very little to spare for creature comforts.

Dr Bairstow awoke late one night to hear vigorous whispering under his window. A moment later, a vehicle coughed into life and drove away. Silence fell. Dr Bairstow turned over and closed his eyes again.

The next morning, two tables, half a dozen chairs, and a sofa

appeared to have mysteriously materialised overnight. The next night saw the acquisition of three single beds. On the night after that, St Mary's appeared to have enjoyed a visit from the wardrobe fairy. With some regret, Dr Bairstow requested the presence of Mr Markham at his earliest convenience.

He bounced into Dr Bairstow's office, wearing his usual sunny smile, and clutching a diver's helmet in one hand and a lump hammer in the other. With true heroism, Dr Bairstow forbore to ask.

'Good morning, sir. You wanted me.'

'Good morning, Mr Markham. There appear to be quantities of furniture appearing all over my unit.'

'Yes sir.'

'The paperwork for which I cannot trace.'

'No sir.'

'Might I enquire as to the origins of this unexpected bounty?'

'Of course, sir.'

Silence.

'Please consider my request as an instruction to explain the origins of this unexpected bounty.'

'Sorry sir. The municipal tip.'

'I'm afraid I don't quite follow.'

'They've got some great stuff there, sir. And it's our duty to recycle,' he added, virtue (among other things) oozing from every pore.

'But, and correct me if I am wrong, the purpose of the municipal tip – wherever that might be – is for people to dispose of unwanted, worn out, and possibly infested household items?'

'No, spot on, sir. Well done.'

'I have two areas of concern, Mr Markham. The first is the almost certainly illegal removal of these household items and the consequences should you be apprehended; and second, the varied and no doubt difficult to eradicate wildlife living within it.'

'Not a problem sir. Already dealt with. Professor Rapson has come up with some sort of spray and ...'

Dr Bairstow held up a hand. 'Please say no more.'

'OK. Was there anything else sir?'

'If I could just refer you back to my previous comment concerning the illegal removal of ...'

'Of stuff no one wants, sir. It's recycling. St Mary's is going green.'

'Of that I have no doubt, although possibly we are not referring to the same thing.'

Mr Markham assumed an expression of stricken concern. Lifting anxious eyes to Dr Bairstow, he said piteously, 'We're not doing any harm, sir.'

Dr Bairstow contemplated the guileless face before him. 'While I am

certain this works with elderly ladies, magistrates, and for all I know, Major Guthrie, it cuts no ice with me.'

Markham resumed his normal expression. 'No sir. Do you want us to stop?'

Dr Bairstow shuffled some files from one mountainous pile to another. 'I beg your pardon. I am sometimes afflicted with a little deafness. I did not hear your last question.'

'I did not utter it, sir.'

'I am so glad we understand each other.'

St Mary's first all-staff briefing was generally reckoned to be a bit of a landmark. Especially when it was made clear that an all-staff briefing was just that. A briefing for *all* staff.

'We are all members of this unit. Decisions are made, actions taken, and policies agreed. Everyone is affected and everyone is involved. Physical absence from the unit, serious illness and, in some instances, death are the only excuses I am prepared to consider and only then if they are accompanied by the relevant paperwork. Mr Markham and Mr Randall, please would you present my compliments to the admin and kitchen staff and ask them if they would be good enough to join us. Thank you.'

Some minutes later, with a larger audience, he continued.

'As you know, we operate under the auspices of the University of Thirsk, and tomorrow, their new Chancellor, Dr Evelyn Chalfont, will be paying us a visit.'

He paused, shifted his weight slightly, and continued. 'I would be grateful if, just for once, the first impression of this unit could be a favourable one.'

'Mr Strong, I know the grounds will be immaculate. Mrs Mack, I understand you have already begun preparations for a special luncheon and Mrs Enderby is to give a tour of the Wardrobe Department.'

He said no more and passed immediately to another topic, but not before he had caught Major Guthrie's eye. No words were exchanged but it was clearly understood that Mr Markham and Professor Rapson, if not actually locked in the basement for the duration, would almost certainly be under twenty-four-hour supervision, because nothing must be allowed to interfere with St Mary's presentation of itself as a sober, slightly dull establishment dedicated to the pursuit of historical research.

At eleven thirty on the day in question, a battered Mini, painted in pink and yellow, and coughing fumes from every orifice, ground to a halt outside the front door of St Mary's. The driver's door creaked open, disgorging an astonishingly young, dark-haired woman, carrying

a watering can.

Mr Strong bustled forwards. 'Good morning, Madam Chancellor.'

She seemed somewhat flustered. 'Oh, good morning. It's Mr Strong, isn't it?'

'That is correct, ma'am. May I relieve you of your implement?'

'Oh, yes. Thank you very much. I wonder, when it's cooled down a little, could you splash in some more water? Sadly, she drinks faster than a politician when someone else is picking up the tab. Is Edward around?'

Dr Bairstow appeared.

'Ah Edward. Good morning. As you can see, I made it. You said I wouldn't and I did. Pay up.'

Dr Bairstow regarded the small heap of metal currently lowering property values all over the parish.

'Good heavens, Evelyn. You appear to have driven here in a slice of Battenberg cake.'

'I don't know what you mean,' she said, defensively. 'It goes like a bomb.'

'Not the happiest simile in this context. Can I offer you some coffee?'

'God, yes.'

She plunged up the steps and entered St Mary's.

Seated comfortably in Dr Bairstow's office, she stirred her coffee and smiled at him. Dr Bairstow found he could not help smiling back.

'Madam Chancellor ...'

'Evelyn ...'

'Evelyn. Please do not construe this as any form of criticism, but surely the need to disarm your political opponents with a display of irresponsible student behaviour is over now. You could perfectly easily have been driven here in your official car, surrounded by the Senior Faculty and enjoyed the status commensurate with that of Chancellor of the University of Thirsk.'

'Don't talk to me about the Senior Faculty. Bunch of self-serving, political failures. You know the saying, "Those who can – do. Those who can't – teach." And those who never had any idea what it was in the first place are members of my Senior Faculty. Sorry, Edward, but this is in the nature of a day out for me. You surely wouldn't deprive me of all the fun of getting back and finding what the bastards have been up to while my back's been turned.'

He stirred his coffee. 'I was aware that yours was a somewhat controversial appointment, but are things really that bad?'

'There are those who feel that organising the resistance actually renders me not only unsuitable for this position, but positively dangerous. Never mind that Thirsk was the rallying point for all those

opposing the regime. Never mind that we inspired and protected and defended and ...' She stopped. 'Well, you know what I mean.'

'I do indeed. I'm just astonished that your opponents watched you in action for all those years and still think they possess the ability to take you down. That you couldn't deal with them with one hand behind your back while chairing the Finance Committee at the same time.'

She laughed. 'You must know that it's far easier to deal with the enemy shooting at you from the front than the shadowy bastards trying to knife you in the back.'

'I feel certain you are more than capable of dealing with these ... er ... shadowy bastards.'

'They're not going to cause me any problems. I know I'm a controversial appointment, but I think the feeling was new beginnings etc.. Besides, some of those shadowy bastards weren't quite as ... unambiguous ... in their loyalties as they could have been. I know it and they know I know it. I'll have them out. It's only a matter of time.' She grinned mischievously. 'Perhaps Professor Rapson could brew me something untraceable. How is he, by the way?'

'Thriving.'

'And Dr Dowson?'

'The same.'

'That's good. They wouldn't have liked the new regime at all and after their magnificent efforts during the uprising, they both deserved better. I'm glad you've taken them. In which particular attic have you locked Professor Rapson for the day?'

'Madam Chancellor, I am shocked you would believe me capable of such an action.'

'Sorry. He's in the basement, then.'

'Of course. May I refill your cup?'

'And what of you, Edward? With your funding finally secured, you have surely surmounted your highest hurdle. If you have ever had a holiday then I have yet to hear of it. Surely a few days off now would not do any harm?'

Dr Bairstow stared thoughtfully at his cup. 'I have, in fact, been toying with just such an idea. You are right. Some time ago, I made a promise to someone and I should act upon it. A few days away would be ... very pleasant.'

'Excellent. I shall say no more. So, what do you have for me to see today?'

The visit went well. The Chancellor was eager to be pleased. St Mary's was eager to please. Mrs Enderby's tour of the Wardrobe Department was particularly well received and, possibly wanting to end the visit

on this positive note, Dr Bairstow escorted the Chancellor back to her car.

Mr Strong approached, complete with watering can.

‘I hope we haven’t taken any liberties, ma’am, but a few of us took a quick look under the bonnet and you shouldn’t have any problems from now on. Particularly with the small smoke canister you appear to have concealed behind the carburettor. We were a little puzzled as to its purpose, ma’am, especially as the rest of the engine is so well maintained.

She sparkled with mischief. ‘My secret is out. I hope you don’t want your money back, Edward. Now, I must go. Thank you so much, everyone. A delightful day.’

‘Our pleasure, Madam Chancellor. Perhaps you would allow Mr Strong to hand you your watering can.’

He watched the tiny car fling itself down the drive, scrape through the gates with barely an inch to spare, and roar away.

‘Ah, Mr Murdoch.’

A passing Murdoch, who could have sworn there was no way Dr Bairstow could ever have known he was behind him, ground to a perplexed halt.

‘Mr Murdoch, perhaps you can enlighten me as to why Professor Rapson has requisitioned twenty gallons of milk and twenty jars of honey?’

Murdoch blinked. Whether in genuine innocence or as a delaying tactic was impossible to say. His big face glowed with innocence and a desire to be of assistance. ‘Sorry sir?’

‘Milk? Honey?’

Mr Murdoch appeared to give the matter some thought. ‘Perhaps a breakfast party, sir.’ Then, possibly feeling that more was required of him, ‘With a biblical theme?’

Dr Bairstow’s look of blank incomprehension was a reminder – as if one was needed – that there were occasions when humour at St Mary’s could be a bit of a double-edged weapon.

Murdoch regrouped himself into a vision of beaming goodwill. ‘No idea, sir. How badly do you want to know? Would you like me to investigate?’

‘I’m not sure the answer will make any meaningful contribution to my peace of mind, Mr Murdoch, but I thank you nevertheless for your offer.’

That St Mary’s was becoming an entity in its own right was apparent by the ever-increasing amounts of time Dr Bairstow was spending behind a paper-piled desk. It was noted by Markham, sinking his nose into what he considered a well-deserved pint, that the bigger the piles

the shorter his temper. This statement was not disputed.

With the amount of work to be done, Dr Bairstow might have been forgiven for postponing a small promise made more than two years ago. That he had not forgotten, however, was proved by a conversation he had with Mrs Enderby, head of Wardrobe, who listened placidly to his instructions, took notes, and enquired if the lady had a favourite colour.

Dr Bairstow smiled. 'I think green would be most appropriate. A light green.'

She nodded and gathered up her notes. 'I shall have it ready for you by the end of the week, Dr Bairstow,' and she left the room.

Dr Bairstow sat very still for a few minutes, and then sighed, picked up his pen, pulled out a blank mission file, and began to calculate coordinates and plan an assignment.

Exactly as Mrs Enderby had promised, five days later, a ball gown of sea-green silk hung on the back of his door, carefully swathed in a garment bag. Occasionally he raised his head and looked at it, smiled a little, and then continued with his work.

When he finally had everything arranged to his satisfaction, he reached for the telephone and dialled a number.

It was, perhaps, fortunate that he was alone.

Gently replacing the receiver, he paused for a few moments, his face expressionless, and then dialled a second number.

'Redhouse Nursing Home.'

'I wonder if I could speak to Mrs Green, please.'

'I'm sorry, sir. There is no one here by that name.'

'I should perhaps have said Mrs Bessant? Angela Bessant?'

There was a pause so long that the next words did not come as a surprise.

'I'm sorry sir, Mrs Bessant died last week.'

Dr Bairstow very carefully aligned his files with the edge of his desk.

'That must have been very ... sudden.'

'It was, sir. I don't think any of us, least of all Mrs Bessant, had any idea how little time she had left.'

'I understand her son served abroad. Was he with her when ...?'

'No sir. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to get here in time.'

'Did she ... I wonder, did she ask for anyone?'

'Are you ... Dr ... Bairstow?'

He cleared his throat again. 'I am, yes.'

'She spoke of you several times, sir. She said that every time she smelled cabbage she thought of you. Would that be right?'

He cleared his throat again. 'Yes, it would.'

'We didn't have any contact details, sir, and the lady wasn't always

coherent. I'm sorry, but we couldn't find you.'

The silence lengthened.

'I'm afraid, sir, I took rather a liberty. She was becoming agitated and when it became apparent that she wasn't – that she didn't have very long, when she kept asking, I told her you were just downstairs, signing in. She smiled, and said, "I knew he would come." And then really, sir, she just – fell asleep.'

'I see. That was a kind thought. Thank you, nurse.'

'Is there anything I can do for you, sir?'

'Thank you. No.'

Very carefully, concentrating on his hands, he replaced the receiver and sat motionless for some time.

Long shadows moved silently across the carpet.

Rising stiffly to his feet, he unzipped the garment bag. The sea-green silk shimmered gently in the half-light. Reaching out, he touched the material with only the very tips of his fingers. Just for an instant.

Hearing a movement in the outer office, he called, 'Yes?'

Randall stuck his head around the door. 'Just picking up the post, sir. Was there anything?'

With a sudden decisive movement, Dr Bairstow zipped up the garment bag.

'Would you be good enough to return this costume to Mrs Enderby with my thanks. Unfortunately, it is no longer required.'

'Of course sir.'

He disappeared and his footsteps could be heard clattering off down the corridor.

Dr Bairstow returned to his desk, closed the mission file, and marked it for incineration.

Mrs Green would not be going to the ball.

The night was very dark and still, even inside St Mary's. Just for once, the building was silent. Dr Bairstow sat at his desk, staring at the bottle and glass in front of him. He had not moved for some considerable time.

Everyone has a private face. The one worn when the struggle becomes too much. When the possibility of success seems a very long away. The private face that no one ever sees.

He stirred and reached for the bottle again and as he did so, someone tapped at the door.

The private face fled. He squared his shoulders. 'Come in.'

The door opened to reveal a tall, elegant woman of indeterminate age. She wore her dark hair in a neat French pleat. Her black suit was impeccably tailored. Standing quietly in the doorway, she waited.

They looked at each other for a very long time until Dr Bairstow sat back in his chair, smiled a little, and said, 'Good evening. If you have come in answer to the advertisement for a PA, I haven't placed it yet.'

'No. I have come in answer to a need.'

She pulled the visitor's chair around to the other side of the desk. 'I think I shall always feel more comfortable on this side.'

'You may not get the opportunity.' He topped up his glass again.

She clasped her hands. 'Something has occurred?'

'Actually, no. Nothing has occurred. I left it too late and now it's – too late. Now ... nothing will ever occur.'

She said nothing.

He gestured. 'I had not realised until today how much of myself I've put into St Mary's. How much it demands of me. And will always demand of me. And it's still not completed. Nor anywhere near.'

'I do not think that completion is the issue here.'

'Are you here as my PA?'

'No, not yet.'

'Why not?' He looked around at the disordered room, the mounds of files, cubes and data sticks. 'At least one of us should do something useful.'

She dismissed the tottering piles of paperwork with a wave of her hand. 'You are lonely.'

He smiled bitterly into his glass. 'Even the very loneliest person does not like to have this pointed out.'

She ignored him. 'You have no one. You are out of your own time. You are alone. Your task is Herculean. It would be very natural for you sometimes to feel overwhelmed and Leon Farrell, the one person who might have some understanding of your loss today, is not yet here. You are completely and utterly alone.'

'I do hope your purpose here tonight is not to provide support and encouragement because ...' He made an effort. 'Why are you here?'

'To provide support and encouragement.'

'Can I refer you to my previous statement?'

She said nothing.

He played with his glass. 'I think they may have chosen the wrong person.'

'You volunteered for this task and they chose exactly the right person.'

He stared out of the window into the dark. 'She reminded me of someone I knew a long time ago in the future and then today I learned her name. Her real name.'

'Yes, they were related.'

'I sometimes wonder if I am not cursed.'

She did not reply.

‘Is it so beyond the bounds of possibility that one day I would find someone and she would not die?’

‘You will not always be alone.’

He drained his glass. ‘Why haven’t you come in answer to the advert?’

‘Well, you haven’t placed it yet.’

‘I can’t imagine that that would ever stop you.’

She smiled. ‘You will have a number of assistants before me.’

‘Why?’

‘All the better for you to appreciate my talents when I do arrive.’

He sighed, turning the empty glass around on his desk.

She leaned forwards and switched on his desk light. Shadows fled. Standing up, she turned to the window and drew the curtains, shutting out the dark.

Her voice cut the air like a sword. ‘You will surround yourself with bright and brilliant people. The building will echo to the sound of ideas, discussions, and the occasional small explosion. There will be triumph and disaster in equal measure. There will be outstanding bravery and heart-stopping betrayal. There will be love and loss. There will be devotion to duty and to each other. There will be treachery and defeat. There will be tragedy and death. You will lead and inspire and protect. And once they walk through these doors, no one in this unit will ever be alone again.’

She moved towards the door.

‘Will you always be here?’

Her voice came from a great distance. ‘No, I will not. But I will always be here when St Mary’s needs me.’

The door closed and Dr Bairstow was alone again.

He sat for a while, lost in thought, and then pulled his chair forwards, placed the bottle and glass in his bottom drawer, opened a file at random, and began to work.

Cornered outside R&D and not having the speed for a quick getaway, Dr Bairstow smiled benignly on the two representatives of the Forces of Darkness, or the Society for the Preservation of Historical Buildings, as they probably preferred to be known.

‘I have agreed the amendments to the new staff block. I have agreed that the hangar should be situated behind the main building so that the original façade may remain unspoiled. Please present me with today’s list of unreasonable demands, all of which will, apparently, have been designed to prevent my project ever coming to fruition.’

An earnest young man whose cardigan had obviously been knitted by a loving mother, pushed his spectacles further up his nose and said nervously, ‘Well, to be honest Dr Bairstow, there is one area that causes Miss Spindle and me particular concern.’

Miss Spindle, clutching an armful of folders, gazed adoringly up at him.

‘Only one?’ Dr Bairstow said.

The young man shifted his weight and mentally girded his loins. ‘Our understanding is that this will eventually be an educational establishment.’

‘An eventuality that seems to recede further and further into the distant future with every passing day.’

‘Sir?’

‘A research facility, yes. Under the auspices of the University of Thirsk.’

‘Well, I have to ask, sir ...’

‘Yes?’

‘Blast doors?’

‘Purely a precautionary measure. Nothing to alarm you in any way.’

‘A precautionary measure against what?’

‘Anything that could go wrong.’

‘What could possibly go so wrong you need a set of blast doors? Are you splitting the atom?’

‘Good heavens, no. Well, not on purpose, certainly.’

Dr Bairstow paused for a reaction from the representatives of an organisation famed for its lack of humour. After a while, it became apparent their reputation would remain intact.

‘Actually, they are there to protect the old building. We will have a fully functioning R&D department and their function is – well, you could say, practical history. I don’t know if you’re aware of Greek Fire? Or the ballistic properties of a trebuchet? The blast doors are here solely to protect this fine old building from anything untoward that may occur as the academic mind marches unstoppably forwards in its quest for knowledge.’

He paused, leaned on his stick, and smiled benevolently at them again.

They stepped back.

‘But according to the plans, R&D will be lodged in the main building.’

‘That is correct.’

‘So – they will also occupy this space as well?’

‘R&D personnel will certainly be present on many occasions.’

‘But the structure is massive. It’s practically an aircraft hangar. What on earth could possibly require this amount of space?’

‘My dear sir, have you ever tried to reconstruct the Battle of Hastings? You cannot possibly expect me to fit the entire Saxon fyrd into an area the size of a small bedroom.’

‘You will be fighting battles inside the building?’

‘Only if it’s wet outside.’

They stared at each other, adrift in a fog of mutual incomprehension. In the future, Dr Bairstow was frequently heard to remark that any lighthearted frivolity he might possibly once have possessed had been leeched from his soul by prolonged contact with the Society for the Preservation of Historical Buildings and any complaints should be addressed to them. In triplicate. With full supporting documentation, together with the appropriate plans, diagrams, and projections all countersigned, dated, and stamped with official approval.

He tried again. ‘Not if we cannot reach some sort of compromise today, no. As I understand your function, it is to provide advice and information relevant to renovating a listed building. It is not to question the function to which that building should be put.’

‘Well, actually ...’ began the young man, who was pretty sure it was.

‘The appropriate permissions have been acquired and the plans approved. There really is no more to discuss.’

‘But ...’

‘I thought I had made it perfectly clear. This project must be completed by the date specified. A great deal hangs on this. I am sure you must be as committed to ...’

He pushed open a door as he spoke and stopped dead on the threshold.

Contrary to the rest of R&D, which was almost permanently buried in miscellaneous clutter, this room was empty. Or rather, almost empty. At this moment and in this company, Dr Bairstow would have given a great deal of the money he did not possess for this room to be empty. Unfortunately, it was not.

Messrs Markham, Ritter, Weller, and Evans, naked apart from inexpertly tied tea towels disguised as loincloths, stood motionless in each corner, apparently smothered from head to toe in a mixture of honey and slightly sour milk.

The gently bred Miss Spindle, who had for years been strangely susceptible to men who wore astonishing knitwear, now began to perceive her horizons had been unnecessarily narrow and moved forward for a clearer view.

Professor Rapson himself cut a magnificent figure, reclining on a gilded chaise-longue in the middle of the room. He wore a long black wig and a golden tunic and was, as far as Dr Bairstow dared ascertain, honey free.

Dr Dowson, wearing a beekeeper’s mask, which was, mercifully, muffling his complaints, was busy decanting what looked like several thousand bluebottles into the room. ‘Are you ready?’

With a gesture similar to Ramses unleashing his forces at the Battle of Kadesh, Professor Rapson indicated that he was indeed ready. An anticipatory buzzing filled the room. Most of it from the flies.

Released from captivity, they zipped around for a few moments, presumably getting their bearings, and then, apart from one or two specimens who had fallen to the floor in excitement and were now on their backs waving their legs in the air, every bluebottle in the room settled on Professor Rapson.

Dr Bairstow gently closed the door and ushered his bemused guests down the corridor.

‘What on earth ...?’

‘Human flypaper,’ said Dr Bairstow in tones which gave them to understand they now had all the information they needed to know exactly what was going on.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Human flypaper. One of the pharaohs – I’m sorry I can’t offhand recall which one – in an effort to keep the flies off his sacred self, covered his slaves in a mixture of honey and milk and stationed them around his palace.’

‘But it didn’t work. Did it? I mean ... that poor man ... he was covered ...’

‘I expect it was his aftershave,’ said Dr Bairstow, taking full advantage of their momentary confusion. ‘If you could just sign here, please ... and here ... and here. Thank you so much.’

Much of the structural work was completed and St Mary’s was, allegedly, weatherproof. Miscellaneous articles of furniture continued to mushroom. Literally, in some cases. Mismatched curtains adorned dusty windows. The acquisition of enough chairs for everyone to be able to sit simultaneously was celebrated by the first St Mary’s All Comers Yodelling Contest, in which a blushing Mrs Enderby was persuaded to present the prizes, although, as Major Guthrie commented afterwards to Dr Bairstow, the standard had not been high.

The young man from SPOHB, sporting his most exciting knitwear, asked Miss Spindle for her hand in marriage and was politely but firmly rejected. It was subsequently discovered that she had cut her hair, acquired contact lenses, left SPOHB, and taken up a position with a male modelling agency.

St Mary’s continued to take care of itself until, one day, Ritter and Evans erupted in a simultaneous rash, Markham fell out of a tree and landed on his head, and Dr Dowson developed a chesty cough. St Mary’s entire medical expertise consisted of an aspirin and an early night, and Dr Bairstow perceived that the time had come to expand St

Mary's meagre health facilities.

Boarding yet another train, he made his way south east, to a small town not noted for its prosperity. Alighting in a bitter wind, he turned up his coat collar, sought directions from an individual who was a stranger to the area, and set off in what he hoped was the right direction. Ten minutes later, he found himself outside the hospital, where they disclaimed all knowledge and directed him to the free clinic. Where his quest was successful. Taking in the crowded, noisy waiting room, he obeyed instructions and waited.

And waited.

And waited. But he was prepared to be patient.

A curtain swept back on its rings and a doctor emerged, followed by a woman towing a very fat boy, rather like a small moon on a string.

The doctor, a tall woman with her dark hair bound up in a red and white scarf and sporting a T-shirt bearing the legend *Does Not Play Well With Others*, finished writing and handed the mother a piece of paper.

'Nothing serious. Certainly nothing that ceasing to stuff his fat face on chocolate and crisps all day won't cure. Five pieces of fruit and vegetables a day will sort him out. Plenty of exercise, too.'

'But he doesn't like ...'

'I don't care what he does and doesn't like. Continue on this course and you'll be looking at morbid obesity, diabetes, heart trouble, high blood pressure, undescended testicles and complete unattractiveness to the opposite sex. You ...' she addressed herself to the fat boy. 'Put down the computer games and get yourself outside. Fresh air won't kill you. Not enough exercise will.'

'But he doesn't ...' wailed the woman.

The doctor shrugged. 'OK then. Suit yourself. Dead by thirty. Probably best if he doesn't start watching any long-running TV series. Your choice. Next.'

Dr Bairstow rose to his feet. 'Dr Foster?'

'Yes? And?'

'I wonder if might have a word.'

She surveyed the crowded room. 'You are joking.'

'No. Never.'

She stared at him for a moment. 'Two minutes.'

'More than adequate.'

She jerked her head towards the cubicle and made to follow him inside. Pausing suddenly, she surveyed those still waiting and shouted, 'Hey! You! Yes, you at the back! I know why you're here. I've told you before – you have a congenital weakness in your hands and if you continue punching your wife you will do yourself irreparable damage. I'm not prepared to waste my time treating you if you're just ignoring

everything I say.’ She rummaged in her jeans pocket. ‘I need you to sign this piece of paper saying that if you end up paralysed it’s all your own fault for continuing to beat up your wife against medical advice, and this clinic is not in any way responsible.’

Heads turned, seeking the subject of these remarkable statements. At the back, a man rose hastily to his feet and tried to slip away.

‘No, don’t go. Not until you’ve signed this. Alternatively, of course, you could just stop hitting your wife. Why not give it a go? You’ll find your hands will stop hurting and she’ll probably appreciate it too.’

The doors swung shut behind him.

Dr Bairstow could not help enquiring, ‘Was that entirely wise, do you think? I cannot help but feel his wife might suffer considerably at their next encounter.’

‘There won’t be one. His wife is in the next cubicle having her eye stitched up. Again. We needed to get rid of him so she can slip out the back way and off to the shelter. They’re waiting for her. What do you want?’

‘I want you and I’ve travelled a very long way to find you. No, don’t speak, please. I’ve read your career history and it’s impressive. Your attitude – that’s the one that occasionally gets you into a little difficulty – is exactly what I am looking for. I need a doctor who can impose herself upon a group of over-excited and over-educated idiots, and be able to cope with the undoubtedly imaginative ways with which they will try to kill themselves and everyone around them.’

‘Are we talking about a loony-bin?’

‘An astonishingly accurate statement, but no.’

She stared at him. ‘I don’t do compassion.’

‘I’m very glad to hear that.’

‘Or sympathy.’

‘That is excellent news. Do you do swift and effective treatment? Can you save lives on a daily basis? Are you able to improvise? Think creatively? Keep your head amid chaos?’

‘Who *are* you?’

‘My name is Dr Bairstow. You are Dr Helen Foster and I would like to offer you the position of Chief Medical Officer.’

‘No.’

‘Allow me to give you my card.’

‘No.’

‘I have written my telephone number on the back.’

‘I said no. Are you deaf?’

‘Well, if you take up my offer, then we shall be able to find out.’

‘I do good work here.’

‘I don’t doubt it, but I am offering you the opportunity to do great work with me. The combination of your skillset and attitude renders

you unique. Please, I beg you, at least consider the offer.'

She stared at him for a while, her dark eyes assessing what she saw. She opened her mouth to speak, and as she did so, two men, locked together, tumbled from another cubicle, crashed to the floor, and began to roll around, flailing and kicking. Trolleys toppled over, shedding bowls and implements everywhere. A number of security personnel appeared and manhandled them out of the door.

'Well,' she said, 'at least I wouldn't have to put up with this sort of thing ten times a day.'

Something in his silence made her turn to look at him. 'Would I?'

'Well not ten times a day, of course ...'

She opened her mouth, but he was already pushing his way through the double doors and down the steps.

Six.

More time wore on. More people assembled at St Mary's. The structure jokingly known as Hawking Hangar inched its way towards completion.

Dr Bairstow, exhibiting signs of what might, in a lesser man, be classed as anxiety, was frequently seen to be consulting some sort of schedule. The word 'deadline' was on everyone's lips. Tempers frayed. Some snapped altogether and after an exciting session between the newly arrived technical staff and the Security Section, in which views and punches were liberally exchanged, Major Guthrie requested a word with Dr Bairstow.

'With your permission, sir, and before someone is seriously injured, I'd like to provide some sort of safe outlet for these ... difficult moments.'

'An excellent idea, Major. How about cricket? Exciting, dramatic, and yet requiring skill, coordination, and a sense of fair play – exactly what is required.'

'What an excellent idea, sir,' said Major Guthrie carefully, 'but given the numbers involved and the inadvisability of arming them with bats and pointed sticks, I think football might provide a more effective channel for high spirits.'

Dr Bairstow seemed doubtful. 'Well, if you say so. I personally always found that half a dozen overs after lunch could cure most ills but possibly, in view of the number of casualties currently inhabiting Sick Bay, football will provide a more effective means of venting the violently homicidal urges demonstrated today.'

'I quite agree, sir. Was there anything else?'

'I'm afraid so, Major. Walk with me to Hawking, if you please.'

Together, they surveyed the coils of cabling, junction boxes, sacks of concrete, cement mixers, and all the other miscellaneous equipment of

a building uncompleted.

‘I am sorry, Major, but, for reasons I cannot yet explain, it is imperative this area of St Mary’s is completed by Friday night.’

‘I have to say, sir, there is very little likelihood of us achieving that deadline.’

‘That is what I am afraid of.’

‘Is it at all possible to prioritise, sir?’

Dr Bairstow stood deep in thought. ‘An excellent idea, Major. Come with me.’

He turned and left the hangar and they stood at the foot of Sick Bay stairs. To their right, the unfinished hangar. To their left, the recently completed long corridor led back to the main building. Ahead of them stretched a short corridor, with various doors opening off it.

Dr Bairstow limped to the end and halted outside a door.

Major Guthrie consulted his plans. ‘This room is designated as a paint store, sir.’ He pushed open the door, revealing a small square room, at present empty except for copious amounts of dust.

Dr Bairstow stood thoughtfully.

‘Sir?’

‘Actually, I think this may be for the best after all, Major.’

‘Sir?’

‘Find the foreman, if you would be so good. I want electrical sockets and cable points set up in the back corner there. Ask him to pull his people off everything else. If the work can be completed before five o’clock on Friday night there will be a substantial cash bonus in it for him and his team that we probably won’t need to trouble his employers with.’

‘How substantial, sir?’

‘Extremely substantial. On the rare occasions I have to resort to bribery, I like to make a good job of it.’

By five o’clock on Friday night, the seemingly impossible had been achieved.

Half a dozen exhausted, dusty, hollow-eyed workers had worked the clock round, completed their task, enjoyed a drink at Dr Bairstow’s expense, trousered an unspecified but gratifyingly large amount of cash, and departed for the weekend.

St Mary’s heaved a sigh of relief and put its feet up in the bar, where Dr Bairstow’s unprecedented generosity had provided for them also. It seemed safe to assume they would be there for the foreseeable future.

The rest of the building was very silent as Dr Bairstow limped carefully down the stairs, through the Hall, and down the long corridor. There, he paused for a while, listening, but other than the

echoes of voices raised in song and high spirits, there was nothing but the sounds of a building bedding itself down for the night. Wood creaked. A tiny piece of plaster fell from the ceiling. The smell of wet concrete was very strong.

Standing outside the door to the paint store, Dr Bairstow checked his watch for the hundredth time and waited. His face gave nothing away.

He checked his watch again.

Somewhere, another piece of plaster fell.

Dr Bairstow consulted his watch again. The second hand, glowing green in the semi-darkness, swept on.

He shifted his weight a little.

Silence settled all around him. As if the world waited.

And then, the paint-store door creaked slowly open.

Dr Bairstow drew himself up.

A dark shadow stood silhouetted against a darker room.

‘Leon Farrell, sir, reporting for duty.’

‘Good evening, Leon. You appear to be late.’

‘Good evening, Edward. You appear to be standing in the dark.’

‘My dear chap, if you knew the cost of electricity in this time ...’

He stepped forwards as he spoke and the two men shook hands.

‘Leon, it has been a very long time.’

They remained clasping hands for a while although no words were spoken.

‘How are you, Leon?’

‘Not so very different from the last time we met. But looking forward to a new beginning.’

‘No regrets?’

‘At leaving behind my old life? None at all. How about you?’

‘Like you, no regrets. A new start for both of us.’

‘So, how are you, Edward?’

‘Exhilarated. Frustrated. Enthusiastic. Excited. Exhausted. Impatient for completion.’

‘Not long now.’

‘I hope not. This way.’

They turned into the dimly lit long corridor and turned to look at each other properly.

‘Leon, you haven’t changed at all.’

‘Well, that’s because I haven’t. I just waited a few minutes and then jumped after you.’ He paused. ‘I’ll say this just once, Edward. You look tired.’

‘I am tired. The years have been long and there was never anyone else to –’

‘Well, there is now.’ Leon Farrell stopped to stare out of a window

into the dusk. 'So, this is England. What is it like? Is it very bad?'

Dr Bairstow nodded. 'Yes, yes it is. Much worse than the records had led us to believe. Oh, I'm not talking about the physical rebuilding of a nation; I'm talking about the people. Lost, bewildered, without hope. Can there be anything worse than winning one of the greatest struggles in their nation's history and then not having the strength of purpose or the money to build on that. I tell you, Leon, when I saw what it was like, I nearly jumped straight home and requested we postpone for twenty years.'

'But you didn't.'

'No, I didn't. It occurred to me that in some small way, I could make a contribution. Rebuilding St Mary's has provided jobs and purpose. Building pods will provide more. I am slowly recruiting admin staff. I have a few historians already lined up and if you could see the sudden hope in their eyes. To go in an instant from counting oneself lucky to be working in a factory for less than minimum wage to finding oneself with a job, a purpose – and what a purpose.'

He stopped suddenly and Leon Farrell turned away to examine the long corridor and its bare walls with every sign of interest.

Presently, he said, 'So when do I start building pods?'

'Well, Number Two is here already. I would be grateful if you could keep yours quietly tucked away for the time being.'

Farrell nodded.

'I'd like another three pods as soon as you can assemble them.'

'Three?'

'An enormous amount of money has been invested and I'm being pressed for results – which I am eager to provide.'

'If you want three pods then I'm going to need some staff.'

'If you can make it as far as the bar, then I can introduce you to your recently arrived team, and especially to a rather large but gifted young man named Dieter, fresh from the Institute of Engineering at Marienstrasse, where, I understand, they spoke very highly of him.'

'That sounds good.'

'The bar or the gifted young man?'

They walked slowly down the long corridor.

Later that night, Dr Bairstow was to make another and final tick in his notebook

Seven.

More time passed.

To the great alarm of SPOHB, St Mary's expanded. Dr Bairstow's attempts to reassure them by pointing out that for every expansion there was an equal and opposite contraction, usually caused by something else falling down or blowing up, and that he personally felt

that the removal of the hideous Victorian clock tower considerably improved the appearance of this fine old building, however helpfully intentioned, were not well received. A bombardment of reproachful memos and the threat of legal action followed. Dr Bairstow compromised by promising to instruct Professor Rapson to take more care in future.

Mr Markham, competing in the bicycle jousting tournament, took a nasty tumble over his own handlebars and opened his eyes to find the new nurse, a vision of blonde loveliness, regarding him with a distinct lack of sympathy. Asked what his name was and if he knew what day of the week it was, he found himself unable to answer either question, and was instantly admitted to the new paint-smelling Sick Bay.

When it subsequently became apparent that this temporary loss of faculties was not in any way due to the injury to his head, but rather to his heart, the vision of blonde loveliness heartlessly evicted him from Sick Bay with threats of violence and astonishingly bad language.

The Very First Assignment – to observe Julius Caesar’s landing on the south coast of Britain in August 55BC – was generally felt to have been a mixed success. On the one hand, very little of the landing was actually observed – on the other, everyone survived.

Emerging from their pod on this inaugural event, Dr Bairstow, together with historians Lower and Baverstock, discovered themselves to have inadvertently landed on the shoreline, approximately mid-point between the Roman legions on one hand and a bunch of very miffed Brits on the other. Finding themselves being regarded with equal hostility by everyone present, they beat a hasty retreat. Fighting their way through a hail of projectiles raining down impartially from both sides, they eventually gained the safety of their pod where Baverstock was heard to enquire, ‘Dare we hope, sir, than any future perambulations will be accomplished in a more sedate manner?’

Dr Bairstow’s response, ‘By all means if that makes you feel more comfortable,’ was deemed to be perfectly acceptable, and they returned in triumph to enjoy, as Mr Markham had phrased it – The St Mary’s Inaugural Bash.

And then, one mild autumn day...

For the umpteenth time that day, Dr Bairstow got to his feet and limped to his office window. Again, he carefully checked his watch against the old clock in the corner. An observer might have said he was nervous.

The sight that met his eyes was very different from the one that had greeted him on the day of his arrival. The drive was now smooth and pothole free. Rose beds had been planted by the terrace. The South

Lawn, under Mr Strong's obsessive care, rolled gently down to the lake where several swans serenely floated. Dr Bairstow frowned. Last week they had been pink. It would appear that, as per his instructions, some attempts had been made to remedy the situation because today they were blue.

Averting his gaze, he lifted his eyes to the woods surrounding St Mary's and beyond them to the moors, whose bracken was already beginning to turn flaming red and gold under the sunny blue sky.

Outwardly peaceful and still, St Mary's dreamed the day away. As did Dr Bairstow, snatching a brief moment from his crowded desk to relive old memories and old achievements. He leaned more heavily on his stick and smiled into the past.

Waiting ...

A small movement brought his attention back to the present. A taxi had pulled up outside the gates and was turning around, possibly for a quick getaway. St Mary's had acquired a certain reputation ...

His attention sharpened. A small figure had climbed out and was paying off the driver.

Turning, she stood at the gates. He watched her speak into the intercom. The gates opened. She did not enter for a moment, but stood for some time, taking it all in. She wore a cheap, dark suit and carried nothing in her hands. Her short, spiky hair was exactly the same colour as the autumn bracken on the moors.

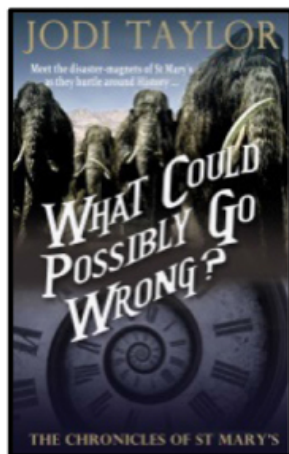
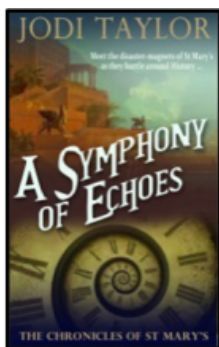
Mistakenly concluding that for the most part, St Mary's seemed harmless enough, she stepped through the gates, and began to walk slowly up the drive. The gates closed silently behind her. She did not look back.

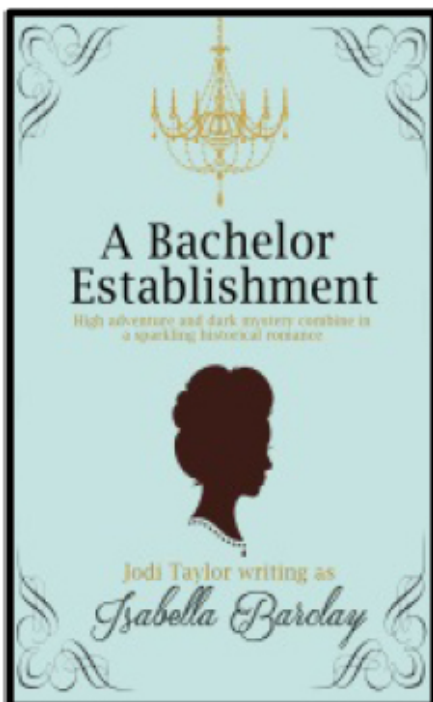
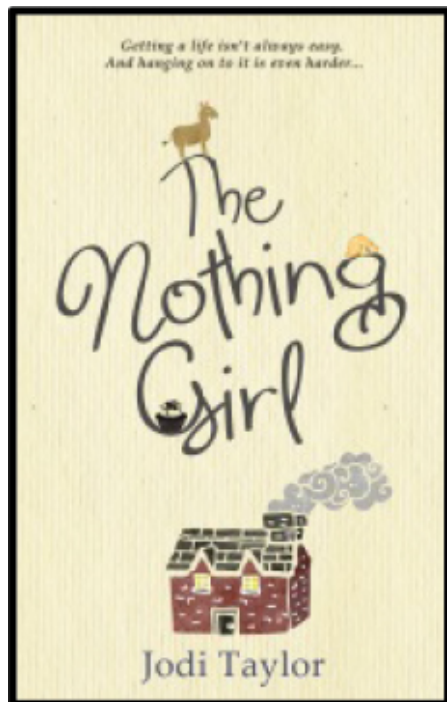
Dr Bairstow smiled gently to himself, nodded, turned from the window, and limped to his desk.

Picking up the telephone, he said, 'Leon, I thought you might like to know. She's here.'

THE BEGINNING

Jodi Taylor





For more information about **Jodi Taylor**
and other **Accent Press** titles
please visit

www.accentpress.co.uk

Published by Accent Press Ltd 2015

ISBN 9781786151971

Copyright © **Jodi Taylor** 2015

The right of **Jodi Taylor** to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by the author in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The story contained within this book is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publishers: Accent Press Ltd, Ty Cynon House, Navigation Park, Abercynon, CF45 4SN